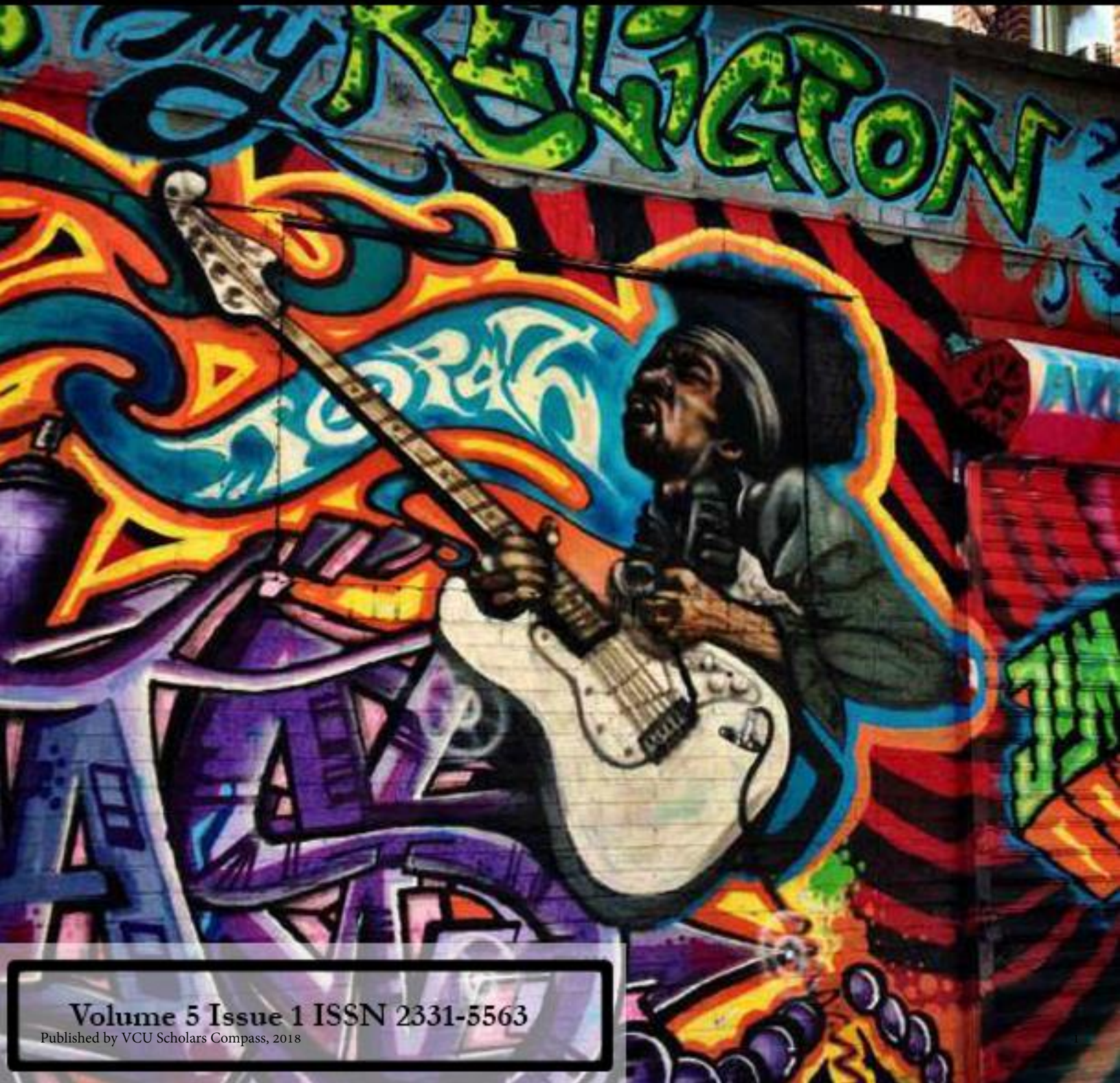


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HIP HOP

STUDIES

SPECIAL ISSUE: HIP HOP AND RELIGION *AND...*



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Foreword

Cassandra D. Chaney

In 2017, Professor Cassandra Chaney at Louisiana State University (LSU) had an idea to do a special issue on Hip Hop and Religion. She spoke with Doctoral Candidate, Travis Harris and Dr. Daniel Hodge to “set off” the tremendous amount of work to start this process. With a growing appreciation for Hip Hop, as it relates to discourses associated with Black romance (Chaney, 2010) and Black motherhood (Chaney and Brown, 2016; Chaney and Brown, 2015), Chaney began to realize that over the past several decades, an increasing number of Hip Hop artists have become more vocal about how they perceive God, religion, spirituality, and heaven. Sometimes these artists support a traditional (Western) religiosity in which believing in God and/or a Higher Power, bible reading, prayer, and song are intrinsic cornerstones. At other times, these artists reject traditional religiosity in favor of a more global manifestation through which they connect with and allow God and/or a Higher Power or their higher moral (spiritual) selves to guide how they interact with and react to others. Still at other times, these artists promote an amalgamation of religious practices and spiritual mindfulness that balances frustration with society and hope for positive change.

In light of her scholarship regarding how religiosity and spirituality influence the historical and contemporary experiences of Blacks in the United States (Chaney, 2014; 2010; 2008; Chaney, Marks, Sasser, and Hopkins, 2010; Chaney, Shirisia, and Skogrand, 2016; Marks and Chaney, 2006), there is an important reason Professor Chaney wanted to do this special issue. Essentially, Professor Chaney’s vision for this special issue is that it be a timely conduit for individuals to understand the historical, cultural, and social salience of religio-spirituality through the uniquely expressive lens of Hip Hop. Her amazing work, contacting and securing additional reviewers, namely Dr. Derrick Aldridge, Dr. Nishawn T. Battle, Dr. Stephan Bradley, Dr. Joy Davis, Dr. Juan Barthelemy, Dr. Keith Edmonds, Dr. Kenny Fasching-Varner, Dr. Stephen C. Finley, Dr. Daniel White Hodge, Dr. Carlos Lee, Dr. Laurie Nsiah-Jefferson, Dr. Kimberly Jones, Dr. Charlotte Marshall, Dr. Ray Robertson, Dr. Matthew Taylor, and Professor Itibari M. Zulu, coordinating and organizing contributed to the success and implementation of “Religion and Hip Hop *And*.”



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Introduction: “Ain’t it Evil to Live Backwards?”: A Hip Hop Perspective of Religion

Travis T. Harris and Cassandra D. Chaney

Historically, Black religion has been the cornerstone of the African experience in America. Due to the “peculiar institution” of slavery,¹ and the ways this institutional residue still affect the lives of slave descendants, Hip Hop provides a forum to simultaneously acknowledge similarities and highlight differences. As Cassandra Chaney notes, “Although religion has the ability to facilitate ‘common thought, purpose and drive,’ the benefits can differ among persons within the same religious organization because of the varied experiences and perspectives of its members.”² Chaney goes on to explain: “While this recognition does not minimize the power of religious institutions to influence persons collectively, it does, however, recognize the potential for many perspectives to coexist within a single religious organization.”³ Chaney reveals how even those within the same religion may differently understand and define religion. There are those from various faith traditions, such as Christians and Muslims, who assert that their worldview, whether it is Christianity or Islam, is not a religion. If scholars view this particular non-religious group as religious because of their faith tradition, then scholars may inaccurately analyze their lives and worldviews. What scholars of religion and Hip Hop studies have revealed are the ways in which the effectiveness and our very understanding of “religion” changes when we bring Hip Hop in to the mix.⁴

¹ Enrico Dal Lago, *American Slavery, Atlantic Slavery, and Beyond: The US “Peculiar Institution” in International Perspective*, Routledge, 2015.

² Cassandra D. Chaney, “The Benefits of Church Involvement for African-Americans: The Perspectives of Congregants, Church Staff, and the Church Pastor,” *Journal of Religion & Society* 10, (2008): 2. Cassandra D. Chaney, “Religiosity and Spirituality among Members of an African American Church Community: A Qualitative Analysis,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 27, no. 3 (2008): 201-234.

³ Chaney, “The Benefits of Church Involvement for African-Americans,” 2008.

⁴ Monica Miller and Pinn, Anthony, *Religion and Hip Hop Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

What do we mean by Hip Hop? We identify Hip Hop as an African diasporic phenomenon.⁵ Since it is insightful, educational, poetic, socially relevant, and globally significant,⁶ solely focusing on Hip Hop as a Black popular culture does not fully capture Hip Hop's essence.⁷ Identifying Hip Hop as an African diasporic phenomenon raises additional concepts to consider and provides a more nuanced analysis. The diasporic elements highlight a sense of homelessness, dispossession and a transatlantic connection to Africa and European colonization. An African diasporic perspective ensures that all African diasporic peoples, not just African Americans, are involved in Hip Hop's identity, especially since African diasporic peoples and Africanist aesthetics contributed greatly to Hip Hop's manifestation in the Bronx in the early 1970s.⁸ This African diasporic perspective is essential to our argument about Hip Hop's perspective on religion because scholars have argued that African and African diasporic peoples "Africanize" religions.⁹ This Africanization does not fit in the boundaries of "sacred" and "secular" nor of institutional religions.

⁵ Brenda Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), Halifa Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), Marc D. Perry's *Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). Johnson, Imani, *Dark Matter in B-boying Cyphers: Hip Hop in a Global Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)

⁶ Sam Berkson, "Hip Hop World News: Reporting Back," *Race & Class* 59, no. 2 (2017): 102-114. Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Civitas Books, 2009). Wilson C. Chen, "Rotten Bananas, Hip Hop Heads, and the American Individual: Teaching Eddie Huang's Memoir *Fresh off the Boat* and Its Tropes of Literacy," *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 4. Horton, Akesha M., Erik J. Byker, and Keith Heggart, "Hip-Hop Music as a Pedagogical Tool," in *Culture, Learning, and Technology: Research and Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2017): 58. Oliver, Adrienne D. "'Tell Me a Story': Using Critical Hip Hop Narratives to Decolonize College Composition," PhD diss., Mills College, 2017. Duchan, Joshua S. *Heaven Was Detroit: From Jazz to Hip-Hop and Beyond*, by M.L. Liebler, *Michigan Historical Review* 42, no. 1 (2017): 111-112. Sultanova, Razia and Megan Rancier, eds. *Turkic Soundscapes: From Shamanic Voices to Hip-Hop*, (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁷ Michael Gomez describes how focusing on African Diasporas provide a different theoretical lens than solely focusing on African Americans in *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (2005).

⁸ Juan Flores, "'Que Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the US," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 13, no 3 (1985). William Eric Perkins, *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). Flores, Juan, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). H. Samy Alim and Alastair Pennycook, "Glocal Linguistic Flows: Hip-Hop Culture(s), Identities, and the Politics of Language Education," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 6, no. 2 (2007): 89-100.

⁹ John Mbiti goes into detail explaining the ways in which African religion functions in the daily life of Africans in *African Religions and Philosophy*, especially pages two through three (African Religions & Philosophy, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990 2nd edition). Numerous other scholars discuss this Africanization in sections of their work or as a complete essay such as Gayraud S. Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1973), M. Akinyela, "Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized

In order to account for the multifaceted essence of this African diasporic phenomenon, we employ Lawrence "Kris" aka "KRS One" Parker's framework of Hip Hop. KRS One describes three ways to conceptualize Hip Hop based on three different spellings: Hiphop - collective consciousness, Hip Hop - culture, and hip hop - products. The latter two of the three are self-explanatory and receive adequate scholarly attention. "Do it for the culture" is a common term that, at times, signifies the Hip Hop culture. What KRS contributes with the first conception, Hiphop, gets at something more than the culture and the products that Hip Hop produce. Hiphop captures the importance of sacrifice and the notion that it is a "shared idea" that exists "outside of time and space."¹⁰ KRS One's depiction of Hiphop aligns with scholars and practitioners notions of a "real Hip Hop" that contains some level of metaphysical reality or unseen elements and goes beyond just making music or money. Hiphop, we contend, also provides the space to discuss the diasporic elements that birthed in Africa and lives on throughout the diasporas.

At the heart of the discussion within religion and Hip Hop is the conversation on race, racism and ethnicity. For many non-Whites, this realization of self connects to sexuality, masculinity and femininity,¹¹ while for others; it is firmly rooted in various aspects of Black womanhood.¹² Regardless of the identity to which they most strongly identify, non-Whites in the United States and abroad experience institutional and systemic inequality.¹³ Miller, Hodge, Coleman, and Chaney note, "Through Hip Hop, one was able to discover the shared experiences and crises taking place in various urban cities, and realize that he or she was not alone or singled out."¹⁴ Therefore, race and racism are consciously crafted megaphones by which Hip Hop analyzes their past, their

Christianity, and a Black Ethos" (2003) and J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (2005).

¹⁰ Lawrence "Kris" Parker, *40 Years Of Hip Hop - KRS 1 Lecture*, YouTube, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYEgYnGVowo>.

¹¹ Cassandra Chaney, "The Tears of Black Men: Black Masculinity, Sexuality, and Sensitivity in R&B and Hip Hop," in *Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?: Gender, Race and Sexuality in the Identities of Contemporary Black Men*, eds Brittany C. Slatton and Kamesha Spates (New York: Routledge, 2016): 103.

¹² Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown, "Representations and Discourses of Black Motherhood in Hip Hop and R&B over time," *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 12. Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown, "Is Black Motherhood a Marker of Oppression or Empowerment? Hip-Hop and R&B Lessons about 'Mama'," *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 7. Pough, Gwendolyn D. *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (New Hampshire: Northeastern University Press, 2015).

¹³ Travis T. Harris and Daniel White Hodge, "They Got Me Trapped: Structural Inequality and Racism in Space and Place Within Urban School System Design," in *Addressing Environmental and Food Justice toward Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, eds Anthony Nocella, K. Animashaun Ducre, and John Lupinacci (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 15-33. Washington, Ahmad Rashad. "Integrating Hip-Hop Culture and Rap Music into Social Justice Counseling with Black Males," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 96, no. 1 (2018): 97-105.

¹⁴ Monica Miller, Daniel White Hodge, Jeffrey Coleman, and Cassandra D. Chaney, "The Hip in Hip Hop: Toward a Discipline of Hip Hop Studies," *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 6.

present, the connection between past and present and motivates its listeners to activism. To make this point, Hip Hop intellectual Travis Harris writes:

In describing racism and the long history of activism in response to racism by African Americans in general and Hip Hop artists in particular, scholars have given attention to the socio-historical and cultural dimensions that shape Hip Hoppers, the ways in which Hip Hop is a part of and can be used as a tool of activism, and how performances can be used to transmit culture and provide an identity for those who are a part of that culture.¹⁵

Thus, connecting Blacks,¹⁶ religion, and Hip Hop respects the triadic salience by which the lives of the oppressed, within the United States and abroad, gains meaning and validation. Furthermore, this multifaceted notion of Hip Hop points to those who “live” Hip Hop and those who take part either in some of the culture or the products of Hip Hop. By living Hip Hop, we mean people who identify as Hip Hop. Hip Hop provides a way for these particular individuals and communities to move throughout the world and empower them with a sense of confidence and ability to resist oppression. This differs from someone who enjoys Hip Hop music or dresses a certain way. Therefore, when we are talking about “Hip Hop,” we are keeping the range and depth of communities and individuals’ involvement and identity in mind.

If practitioners of different “religious” groups conceive of “religion” differently, “Hip Hop” has multiple connotations, and White Supremacy oppresses a Blackness that intertwines with Hip Hop, how then do we understand religion and Hip Hop? Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn help us to begin to answer this question in *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* (2015). They contend that we think about “what religion *does*” and place religion/Hip Hop in an “and/in” relationship where scholars think about religion and Hip Hop and religion in Hip Hop. While we are indebted to their contribution, we actually start from different presuppositions. They position the “Hip Hop generation” after the “Civil Rights generation.” We contend for a Black freedom struggle where there is no particular “Civil Rights Movement” and thereby no clear demarcation between these two generations. Further, this concept of the Hip Hop generation is not clear because time is the only parameter for this generation. If Hip Hop has the ability to escape space and time, does the “Hip Hop generation” account for this conception of Hip Hop?

Given that we have provided a thorough identification of Hip Hop and examined religion and Hip Hop together, one may raise the question: What do we mean by “religion”? First, we are cognizant of the academic battles over identifying and

¹⁵ Travis T. Harris, “Putin’ on for Da Lou: Hip Hop’s Response to Racism in St. Louis,” M.A., The College of William and Mary, 2016, 3.

¹⁶ When we say “Blacks,” we are referring to a politicized Blackness not confined to the U.S. racial boundaries of being “Black” and “binds African-descendant individuals and communities in lived historical terms of past and present.” Marc D. Perry, “Global Black Self-Fashionings: Hip Hop as Diasporic Space.” *Identities* 15, no. 6 (2008): 635–64.

defining religion. We highlight Monica Miller's *Religion and Hip Hop* (2013), where she analyzes Anthony Pinn's notion of complex subjectivity and quest of meaning by tracing his intellectual heritage back to William James and Charles Long.¹⁷ Building on the work of Russel McCutcheon, Robert Beckford and other scholars, she argues that the "academic study of religion should engage social processes and human activity, rather than (unique) religious essence and presence."¹⁸ Ultimately, quoting Talal Asad, she contends: "There is no transhistorical essence to religion."¹⁹ While we agree with Asad's depiction of religion, especially when considering the many ways people theorize religion around the world, we take a different approach on Long than Miller does.

Since Hip Hop is an African diasporic phenomenon, we look to African diasporic scholars to inform our theory of religion and our approach to religion and Hip Hop studies. Additionally, Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo illustrate that African music and dance are also "powerful spiritual grammars and rituals of socialization, languages of interventions in nature and society, contributing to the expression of African religious and cultural beliefs."²⁰ African and Afro-Atlantic performances involve a continual creation of identity and carry African histories, memories and ways of knowing that are transmitted from generation to generation.²¹ Therefore, to an extent, African aesthetics of Hip Hop directly intertwines with African "religions." To say it another way, African aesthetics are religious and thereby, Hip Hoppas can perform African religiosity, knowingly or unknowingly. As a result, scholars of African diasporic religion are well suited to guide our understanding of religion.

The scholars we utilize are Charles Long, Vincent Harding, Dianne M. Stewart and Tracey E. Hucks, James Noel, Tamara Lomax, Yvonne Chireau, LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant and, as we will describe later, Tupac. We start with Long because of his influence on the theory and study of religion. Many of the aforementioned scholars we utilize and scholars of religion and Hip Hop build on Long's work. Whereas Monica Miller focuses solely on Long's contribution to Pinn's development of complex subjectivity, we use Long to bring forth how Europeans racists' views shaped the

¹⁷ In her critique of Pinn, she uses Jacques Derrida concept of play and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus. She states this about Derrida's idea of play: "Derrida gestures towards the instability and undecidability of signs—hence, why meaning can never be coherent and stable, but rather is theorized as infinite play of signification" (113).

¹⁸ Monica Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 11.

¹⁹ Ibid, 121.

²⁰ Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances* (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2010) 2.

²¹ In addition to Diouf and Nwankwo see E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

beginning of the study of religion.²² Long explains that the “beginnings of the study of religion” must be understood “in light of the beginnings of modern globalization and its origins in the formation of the Atlantic World.”²³ Therefore, “religion from this perspective no longer defines an intimacy of meaning but is objectified in time, space, and cultural ideology in various modes of distantiation.”²⁴ This period of colonization, transatlantic slavery and European domination shaped their academic approach to perceive non-Europeans as “empirical others.”²⁵ Long defines empirical others as “a cultural phenomenon in which the extraordinariness and uniqueness of a person or culture is first recognized negatively.”²⁶ In other words, the beginning of the study of religion completely missed the creativity and ingenuity of non-Europeans. They defined their religion for them regardless of non-Europeans’ thoughts about what religion is and if they believed “religion” accurately described their belief or actions.

Cognizant of the origins of the study of religion, we connect Long’s description of the religion of diasporic Africans to Vincent Harding’s metaphor of the river and his perspective of the long Black freedom struggle to lay the foundation of our theory and study of religion. Contrary to European colonizers beliefs, enslaved Africans not only had a worldview but also, according to Long, in the midst of their “bizarre reality,” they created “an-other reality” at the “level of their religious consciousness.”²⁷ While many scholars analyze African diasporic experiences from Long’s angle of opacity and oppugnancy,²⁸ we are interested in Long’s description of enslaved Africans ability to create a worldview distinctly different from the dehumanizing and traumatic “bizarre reality” they had experienced. Their ability to do this at the “level of their religious

²² Miller’s discussion of Charles Long is solely within her critique of Pinn’s intellectual heritage. Therefore, she may have the same perspective of the rest of Long’s work as we do.

²³ Miller’s discussion of Charles Long is solely within her critique of Pinn’s intellectual heritage. Dianne M. Stewart, Tracey E. Hucks, and James Noel goes into detail about the Atlantic world and the ways in which that should inform our theory and study of religion. See Diane Stewart and Tracey E. Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field,” and James Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*.

²⁴ Miller’s discussion of Charles Long is solely within her critique of Pinn’s intellectual heritage. Therefore, she may have the same perspective of the rest of Long’s work as we do.

²⁵ In fact, F. Max Müller, who Charles Long identifies as the first historian of religion, had claimed an Aryan nature (which meant he was a member of the supreme race) in his book *Introduction to a Science of Religions (Significations)*, 18).

²⁶ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 80.

²⁷ Charles H. Long, “Perspectives for a Study of African-American Religion in the United States,” in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, eds Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 27.

²⁸ For example, see Baker-Fletcher, Garth Kasimu, “African American Christian Rap: Facing ‘Truth’ and Resisting It,” in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, (New York: NYU Press, 2003).

consciousness," a place "free of both fantasy and obligation,"²⁹ is important to our understanding of religion because of the multifaceted boundaries of slavery that do not allow for exploration. We are fascinated and amazed by a people ripped from their homelands and traverse to an unknown place with racial foreigners on an inhumane ship. When reaching this unfamiliar place, these oppressed people, transformed by these same racial foreigners into property, lose everything they own and serve a lifetime sentence of captivity for doing nothing wrong. Despite these horrific assaults to their bodies, emotions, and psyches, they still create spirituals, write poems, tell folktales and imagine freedom. Harding, in *There Is a River* (1981), describes the experience this way: "Indeed, to love freedom so fully in the midst of slavery *was* religion, *was* radical."³⁰ Our fundamental conception of religion points to holistic freedom in the midst of an oppressive situation; it has power and meaning!

In addition to Harding's statement about religion, key to our theory of religion is his metaphor of a river. Contrary to a myopic view of the Civil Rights Movement identifying the long struggle for Black freedom, Harding's river started flowing in Africa when the first Africans resisted slavery on their homeland and continues to this day. This river of the Black freedom struggle "is people, but it is also the hope, the movement, the transformative power that humans create and that create them, us, and makes them, us, new persons." Harding's river metaphor expresses components of our theory of religion that includes hope and creative power that humans contribute to and it works on them. Furthermore, this metaphor captures the "powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life" freedom struggle that generations of Africans and African diasporic people have been a part of.³¹

Tamura Lomax, Yvonne Chireau and Manigault-Bryant expand our framework of religion and methodological approach to the study of religion. In addition to Lomax and Manigault-Bryant discussing the aforementioned ways in which to understand religion (intersectionally accounting for gender, race, sexuality, class and power), Lomax broadens our perspective of what creates religion. She builds on Toni Cade Bambara's definition of technology: "The study and application of the laws that govern the events in our lives" to describe the multiple ways in which Black folx create and imagine sacred power in order to survive.³² In many ways, she echoes Chireau. Lomax states: "Black religion has always been inherently plural and Afrofuturistic due to its merging of spirituality, myth, time travel, magic, innovation, and fantasy."³³ Several

²⁹ Charles H. Long, "Prolegomenon to a Religious Hermeneutic," *History of Religions* 6, no. 3 (1967): 262. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1061754>.

³⁰ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Freedom Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 61.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Tamura Lomax, "Technology of Living': Toward a Black Feminist Religious Thought," *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 2 (2016): 22.

³³ Ibid, 24.

years earlier, Chireau, in *Black Magic and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (2003), argues that “African American ‘religion’ is not always distinct from what others call ‘magic’,” and that there are levels to Black spirituality. Manigault-Bryant brings our theory of religion full circle by connecting with Lomax, bridging back to Harding’s river metaphor and providing a theoretical approach to conceptualizing a methodology of religion. Based on Manigault-Bryant’s research of seven Gullah/Geechee women from South Carolina *Talking to the Dead* (2014), she concludes:

These factors demonstrate the many ways that cultural influences operate like tides: the ability or inability of the water to reach certain parts of the shore depends on the location of the sun, moon and earth, as well as the time of day and the pull of gravity. ... Rather than occurring in a vacuum, it is a continuous ebb and flow, a dynamic process of give and take that is influenced by- and influences- the people involved, the practices transmitted, the stories shared, the prayers prayed, and the songs sung.³⁴

In Harding’s explanation of coming up with the river metaphor, he shares how it “took life within me.”³⁵ We contend that the same river came over Manigault-Bryant. Her strikingly similar explanation of the religion of Gullah/Geechee women aligns with Harding because they both are on the same river. We contend that the river flowed from the African shores, to the 1960s in the South, and on into the 2000s in the low country of South Carolina; these are all the points that Harding and Manigault-Bryant had discussed.

Our vibrant, dynamic and powerful theory of religion leads us to argue that when scholars are analyzing religion and Hip Hop, they should let the Hip Hoppa define what “religion” is. In *Black Magic and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, Chireau reveals the ways in which scholars do not fully conceptualize Black religion and thereby misunderstand religion altogether. Scholars had identified “magic” as outside the bounds of “religion.” Because of Chireau’s contribution and the complexities and nuances of Black religion, it is quite possible for even seasoned scholars to either miss or discount something that is “religious.” Look at Manigault-Bryant’s identity and work she conducted in order to adequately capture the religious life of the Gullah/Geechee women. She is a Black woman, a “Geechee girl,” “reared thirty minutes from the Sea Islands” and spent four years doing life with these women.³⁶ She “stayed at their homes and attended church and Bible Study with them.” She also “went with them to the grocery store, helped them wash vegetables from the gardens and market stands, cooked with them, and spent months driving between their

³⁴ LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) ebook, preface.

³⁵ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River*, xix.

³⁶ Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead*, ebook chapter 1.

churches residences and jobs.”³⁷ We have yet to read an ethnography that has gone into such detail into Hip Hoppa’s lives.

Moreover, Manigault-Bryant obtained that level of access because of her identity. White Supremacy still reigns and many of the same problems in the study of religion that Long had described persist today. Scholars are prone to perpetuate a form of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, ableism etc.) which could also lead to scholars distorting Hip Hoppa’s “own creative agency and genius.”³⁸ Furthermore, any critiques of our theory of religion actually strengthens our argument because the imprecise nature and conflicting views of “religion” requires the Hip Hoppa to define it in order to get to its closest essence when identifying Hip Hop and religion. Therefore, we contend that a “hiphopography” is the best approach to study religion with a Hip Hoppa or within a Hip Hop community. James Spady first coined this term and methodological approach in *Nation Conscious Rap* (1991). A longtime colleague of Spady, who also co-authored numerous works with him, H. Samy Alim, describes hiphopography like this:

Hiphopography can be described as an approach to the study of Hip Hop culture that combines the methods of ethnography, biography, and social and oral history. Importantly, hiphopography is not traditional ethnography. Hierarchical divisions between the “researcher” and the “researched” are purposely kept to a minimum, even as they are interrogated. This requires the hiphopographer to engage the community on its own terms. Knowledge of the aesthetics, values, and history as well as the use of the language, culture, and means and modes of interaction of the Hip Hop Nation Speech Community are essential to the study of Hip Hop culture.³⁹

Based on Alim’s description of hiphopography and in light of the prior problems to the study of religion, it becomes clear why we are pushing this method. The cultural immersion and in-depth research into the lives of Hip Hoppa creates the potential to recognize the elements of their lives that could be “religious.” This immersion involves growing in a knowledge, identity and community of Hip Hop. The inability to fully grasp Hip Hop hinders the scholars’ ability to capture religion and Hip Hop. In addition, the collapsing of hierarchical divisions humbles the scholar and situates them in a position to address their own bias or ways of perpetuating oppression. Most importantly, hiphopography elevates the voice and perspective of the Hip Hoppa. By elevating their voice, the scholar can fight White Supremacy if it is silencing the Hip Hoppa’s voice.

Scholars of religion and Hip Hop studies must elevate Hip Hop’s voice. Numerous Hip Hoppas believe their particular faith tradition is not a religion and are

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Yvonne Chireau, “Theorizing Africana Religions: A Journal of Africana Religions Inaugural Symposium,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 22, no. 1 (2014), 125-160.

³⁹ H. Samy Alim, “The Natti Ain’t No Punk City’: Emic Views of Hip Hop Cultures,” *Callaloo* 29, no. 3 (2006): 969.

utterly opposed to the idea of religion. From their vantage point, not only does religion inaccurately portray their beliefs, it also breaks like-minded people apart and keeps people who believe differently away from what the group believes in. However, if work done by a scholar of religion and Hip Hop fully describes the phenomenon, then we can apply the academic category of “religion” to the analysis. The very discussion of not wanting to be defined as religious can still fall within the religious studies umbrella because they are arguing for what is and what is not religious. Therefore, we have developed these seven broad categories to describe the phenomenon of religion and/in Hip Hop:

1. Individual/community who is a part of a religious tradition and Hip Hop culture
2. Individual/community who is not a part of a religious tradition but Hip Hop is their religion
3. Individual/community who is not a part of a religious tradition, they are a part of the Hip Hop culture and/or collective consciousness and have developed their own worldview
4. Individual/community who is a part of a religious tradition but say they are not religious and say they are a part of the Hip Hop culture
5. Individual/community who takes a religious tradition and Hip Hop and makes a brand new phenomenon—either a new religion or a different metaphysical understanding of Hip Hop
6. Individual/community who is a part of the Hip Hop culture and uses components of a religious tradition
7. Individual/community who is a part of a religious tradition and listens to Hip Hop music but not a part of the culture or collective consciousness

With these seven categories in place, we argue that in addition to religion and Hip Hop, there is a third entity to consider which we signal by an “and.” The “and” represents the additional ways of seeing the world that fall within category 3 and covers the plethora of perspectives ranging from spirituality to being in harmony with nature. Therefore, the three phenomena for religion and Hip Hop studies to interrogate are, Hip Hop, religion and *and*.

Literature Review

In 2015, Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn publish an edited collection, *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, which provides the framework and title of the subfield *religion and Hip Hop studies*.⁴⁰ The publication of a reader provides a key marker in the subfield of religion and Hip Hop studies; chronologically, theoretically, conceptually and methodologically. In addition to the timestamp, *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*

⁴⁰ Monica Miller and Anthony Pinn, *Religion and Hip Hop Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.

is the key text that conceptually shapes religion and Hip Hop studies. It should not be lost that these twenty-eight chapters existed before the creation of the reader, which points to the amount of scholarly work on religion and Hip Hop studies that had been complete up to 2015. Theoretically, *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* posits, “The study of religion and hip hop has reached a point where reflection on its content, attentions, and scope is necessary.”⁴¹ In other words, scholars can theorize about the very intersection of religion and Hip Hop simultaneously without dividing this phenomenon into one particular discipline such as religious studies or Hip Hop studies. Moreover, since scholars have analyzed religion and Hip Hop together, they have researched the subfield from various methodological approaches that goes beyond lyrical analysis. Therefore, we will look back at major contributions leading up to this work and key texts that are paving the way forward.

The Hip Hop and Religion Reader provides a historiography up to the point of publication, we will only highlight key points that directly relate to the main themes within the subfield. Miller and Pinn reveal that the first text to discuss religion and Hip Hop studies is John Michael Spencer’s special issue in *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* “The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap” (1991). Following the publication of numerous books, special issues, dissertations, and journal articles, such as “Searching for Black Jesus” in Michael Eric Dyson’s *Open Mike* (2003), the next key text we will highlight is Anthony Pinn’s *Noise and Spirit: The Religious Sensibilities of Rap Music* (2003). In this edited collection, Pinn highlights the importance of the “spirit” and “spirituality” and humanism in relationship with Hip Hop. Pinn explains how humanism—“a nontheistic form of life orientation that relies on human ingenuity and creativity to achieve greater life options and a degree of subjectivity”⁴² — is intertwined throughout the music and culture. Further, *Noise and Spirit* elucidates how the spirituality present in rap music grows out of the socio-cultural and political aspects of Black life in America.

Whereas Pinn’s edited collection contributes to our understanding of humanism and spirituality which are outside of the confines of “religion” and falls within our notion of “and,” Miller’s *Religion and Hip Hop* (2013) challenges Pinn’s (among others) framework of religious orientation as a quest for meaning. She builds on the work of Russell T. McCutcheon, Talal Asad and other scholars who question whether religion is *sui generis* or not. Miller contends that usually scholars approach Hip Hop and ask what is religious about Hip Hop, coming from “unintended consequences” based on theories of religion that hold to religion being *sui generis*. In doing so, scholars had brought predetermined categories and understanding of religion (quest for meaning) to

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Anthony B. Pinn, “Handling my Business’: Exploring Rap’s Humanist Sensibilities” in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, (New York: New York University Press), 86.

Hip Hop in their research. This places the scholar in a superior position and limits the possibilities of fully conceptualizing religion, even when considering a phenomenon that should expand those boundaries, Hip Hop. This perspective also allows religion and Hip Hop studies to move away from asking what is religious or not to “uses and functions of religious rhetorics” and “a consideration of what type of social and cultural work(s) are accomplished by such deployments.”⁴³

The emergence of Miller’s 2013 book theoretically segues into the reader, which argues for examining religion “and/in” Hip Hop. They explain that the religion and Hip Hop/religion in Hip Hop conception reveals, “There are clear intersections and commonalities between religion and Hip Hop, but also noteworthy distinctions that speak to methodological and theoretical distinctions in approach to each category.” Daniel Hodge’s book, *Soul of Hip Hop* hints at Hip Hop as religion, and Miller and Pinn fully develop this conception. This ideology shakes the foundation of the conversations surrounding the “sacred” and the “secular” or “mundane.” The reader also provides a framework for scholars of religion and Hip Hop studies to move forward including but not limited to, further interrogating the very nature and meaning of religion and Hip Hop, an examination of the intersection between Hip Hop and religion, new vocabulary and methodological approaches in analyzing religion and Hip Hop. Since this reader, several groundbreaking texts have emerged that align with a specific religious tradition but provide a more thorough analysis of that faith’s intersection with Hip Hop and a dimension of religion and Hip Hop studies that have not been examined spatially, theoretically or methodological. These texts are: Su’ad Abdul Khabeer’s *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (2016), Kymberly N. Pinder’s *Painting the Gospel: Black Public Art and Religion in Chicago* (2016), Mwenda Ntarangwi’s *The Street Is My Pulpit: Hip Hop and Christianity in Kenya*, Daniel White Hodge’s *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* (2017) and Christina Zanfagna’s *Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels* (2017).

In *Painting the Gospel*, Pinder expands the lineage of Hip Hop by focusing on graffiti/street art and connecting this element of Hip Hop to Black artistic traditions. She states:

“My study teases out art historical and transdisciplinary lineages, such as the centrality of the visual in the formation of Black Liberation Theology and its role alongside gospel music and broadcasted sermons in the black public sphere. It is here that I am rewriting both mural art and church histories.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer, eds. *Mapping Christian Rhetorics: Connecting Conversations, Charting New Territories* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Heather Thomson-Bunn, “Empirical Hybridity: A Multimethodological Approach for Studying Religious Rhetorics,” in *Mapping Christian Rhetorics: Connecting Conversations, Charting New Territories* eds. Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer (New York: Routledge, 2014): 125-40.

⁴⁴ Kymberly Pinder, *Painting the Gospel: Black Public Art and Religion in Chicago* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 5-6.

In Pinder's detailed history of Black public art in Chicago, she draws out the many works of religion, sociology and anthropology that have focused on this city but left out Black public art. By including this lineage and rewriting Black artistic history, Pinder's inclusion of graffiti/street art bolsters our stance on the Black freedom struggle rather than a post-civil rights generation, because this post-civil rights perspective primarily focuses on the music.

Khabeer and Hodge make significant contributions to our discussion of religion and Hip Hop "and." In *Muslim Cool*, Khabeer links conceptions of Blackness with Hip Hop and Islam. She draws out the direct connection between systemic racism, identity formation and religion. Khabeer states:

I argue that by establishing connections to specific notions of Blackness, my teachers configure a sense of U.S. American Muslim identity that stands as a counterpoint to the hegemonic norms of Whiteness as well as to Arab and South Asian U.S. American communities. These connections are critical and contested interventions: critical because they push back against the pervasive phenomenon of anti-Blackness, and contested because questions of race, class, gender, and nationality complicate and trouble Muslim Cool's relationship to Black identities and cultures.⁴⁵

In *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel*, Hodge elucidates how the acknowledgement of God is the conduit through which religiosity and spirituality co-exist. He notes, "A sense of life, meaning, context, and space are key elements to understanding how religion fits into a person's life. Moreover, these areas represent pathways for societies to create a spiritual journey and experience with God."⁴⁶ Hodge's intriguing perspective brings together religion and spirituality and highlights the importance of the approach the scholar takes in religion and Hip Hop studies. Hodge reveals how a scholarly understanding of religion can also include spirituality or the "and" for which we argue. *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel* points to the importance of religion and Hip Hop scholars taking an emic or etic approach in their research that can frame the theoretical perspective.

It is within this scholarly discussion that this special issue on religion and Hip Hop enters and raises the pertinent question of why we are arguing for religion and Hip Hop studies to use hiphopography as a methodological approach. The expansiveness and depth of Hip Hop forces scholars to examine a phenomenon that they may not be able to comprehend. The brilliance of Miller's *Hip Hop and Religion* (2013) traces the intellectual heritage of certain scholars who create a particular lens that unintentionally shapes their research. The previous works have made great strides in

⁴⁵ Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 2016) 5.

⁴⁶ Daniel White Hodge, *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* (Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 4.

studying religion and Hip Hop, but we believe that a hiphopography will “unearth dimensions of intellectual importance”⁴⁷ not yet revealed.

Pinn and Hodge bring forth spirituality, but still position both of them within the prescribed understandings of religion. Pinn aimed to decenter Christianity and Hodge joins the two. Their works do fall under our third “and,” but more worldviews exist in and with Hip Hop. Race/ethnicity, some suggest, may complete the trinity of religion and Hip Hop and race, but this does not fully capture every occasion in which external forces impacts a Hip Hoppa’s life. Whereas Khabeer’s work highlights the importance of race and the ways in which non-racially Blacks can identify with Blackness, this conception does not fully account for those who do not identify as religious. Another example are Jews who delineate between being ethically Jewish and religiously Jewish.⁴⁸ Both of these examples highlight the importance of race and ethnicity to religion and identity. However, they do not adequately account for those who do not center race in their identity nor those outside of the United States who may have a notion of a manufactured Blackness associated with Hip Hop that is distant from the social realities of the ‘hoods across America.

Hip Hop and Religion and And

The title of this introduction, “Ain’t it Evil to Live Backwards,” is a line by John “Loaded Lux” Lucks in his battle against Toranio “Calicoe” Hightower, during one of the most popular battles put on by the Ultimate Rap League.⁴⁹ We chose this title because this “haymaker” combines word play, a metaphor and rapped by someone who exemplifies Hip Hop’s perspective on religion, Loaded Lux. First, Lux,⁵⁰ as an African living in America, presents worldviews that seamlessly flow between being gangsta, an activist, a Muslim and a Christian. Right before this metaphor, he raps: “How yall disrespect God?” and then asks if it is evil to live backwards. There are layers to this performance that elucidate how a battle rapper presents his worldview. First,

⁴⁷ Monica Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 7.

⁴⁸ Numerous scholars discuss this with one example being Art Spiegelman’s, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (London: Penguin Books, Limited, 2003).

⁴⁹ The Ultimate Rap League (URL) is the most respected and well-known Battle Rap leagues. This battle is posted on YouTube in several videos, but the video posted by URL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1-z2hxXxKg> has more than five millions views and became so popular that those who do not watch battle rap watched this battle when it went viral on Facebook and Twitter. We highly recommend watching the battle. One of the co-editors did not see the battle before we came up with the title and after watching it; they had a firmer grasp on the line.

⁵⁰ We are intentionally referring to his stage name as Loaded Lux because performance studies scholars have revealed the difference between a clearly defined staged performance and how one performs in daily life. Since we have not conducted an ethnography and spent time with John Lucks in his personal life, we are not making claims about Lucks, only the way he performs on stage. See Julius Bailey *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* (2014), Harvey Young *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (2013) Thomas DeFrantz *Black Performance Theory* (2014), E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003).

this is a performance during Summer Madness, the premier rap battle of the year. There are two ways of viewing this battle, by attending the event, which is referred to as “in the building” and online, primarily through URL’s YouTube channel, which is “on camera.” Based on this setting, for battle rappers in general and Lux in particular to win this battle, he has to deliver his bars a certain way and have strong lyrical content. The Africanist aesthetics of call and response is present. If the crowd (sold out in this instance) is pleased with the line then they respond in the affirmative by shouting out and clapping and if not, they boo. When Lux delivers these two lines, he is conterminously saying something that the crowd can respond to, rhyming and delivering a message. He set up this haymaker by talking about how Calicoe had claimed that he would beat Lux. Therefore, when he asks about disrespecting God and living backwards, this is where the multiple meanings come in. He is either referring to himself, because he just rapped about Calicoe thinking he could win the battle or God, because in the same way Calicoe is wrong about beating him, those who disrespect God are not living right. In addition to all of these components, evil spelled backwards is live.

Our attempt to portray the complexities of Lux’s performance during Summer Madness raises the following questions. If g(G)od (even the spelling of god is difficult here) is either Lux or “God,” what does it mean to Lux to be a god and how does Lux define God? Does he set up the metaphor this way to solely communicate to the crowd they need to consider whether they are living backwards because the battle between him and Calicoe is the only way for them to grasp it? Meaning, if he outright proclaims that the crowd needs to consider whether they are living backwards or not, they may not listen. Another possibility is that he really believes he is a g(G)od or has reached “g(G)od” status in battle rap. As a result of “g(G)od” status, Calicoe should not have even battled him. A last option is that it could be both or none and Lux was just putting on a show. These “loaded” questions elucidate the difficulty of scholars defining Lux’s “religion,” or how he understands the ways in which the world works.

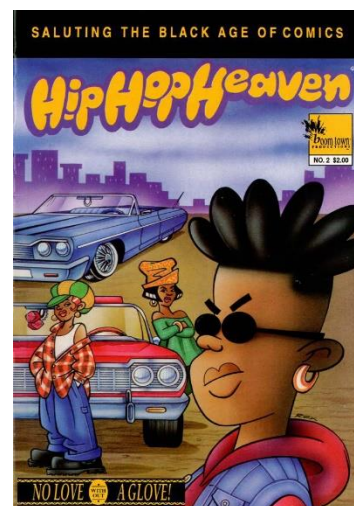
Hip Hop in and of itself bridges the worldly and otherworldly, or the earthly and heavenly.⁵¹ To provide support for this claim, note one artists’ visual



⁵¹ Travis Harris, *Religion and Hip Hop* by Monica Miller, *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 118. Travis Harris, “Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae’s Contribution to Hip Hop” *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 14. Marsh, Clive and Vaughan S. Roberts, “Religion and Western Popular Music: Reach out and Touch Faith?” *Modern Believing* 58, no. 1 (2017): 17-27. Marsh, Dave. *Heaven was Detroit: From Jazz to Hip-hop and Beyond* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017).

rendering of Hip Hop in heaven. In this image, Black Jesus (center) is surrounded by [left to right], Hip Hop artist The Notorious BIG (Biggie Smalls), R&B Legend Marvin Gaye, Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur, Hip Hop Pioneer Grand Master Flash, Hip Hop Artist Aaliyah, and Reggae-Pioneer Bob Marley. Within this space, these artists associate with a racially homogenous Jesus, maintain the same image as they did on earth, and bond through music. It also allows for transcending time and space in bringing people who are dead and alive together.

Over twenty years ago, Craig Rex Perry produced the Christian-comic book, *Hip Hop Heaven* (Boomtown Productions). This outlet was memorable during its time because it addressed issues that were socially relevant (e.g., safe sex in the post-AIDS era) and through its title, promoted the idea that Hip Hop was in many respects 'paradise on earth.' Although this comic book is no longer in print and is currently a collector's item, Perry said the following regarding this endeavor: "It was indeed a fresh indie venture into 'educating while entertaining' young comic readers at the time."⁵² The creator of *Hip Hop Heaven* admits his desire to 'rock the boat' and it is in this spirit that Hip Hop continues to forge new ways of expression.



How does Hip Hop evoke social critique, or essentially "rock the boat?" We assert Hip Hop does this by giving attention to what Robert Hill⁵³ refers to as one of the hallmarks of The Black Family (religion), creating socially conscious observers, and providing a platform through which Hip Hop messengers critically judge the world and specific entities within it. Significant to this process is the ability to connect the earthly and the spiritual. While promoting his album Yeezus during a 2013 Zane Lowe interview, Kanye West proclaims the following, "I just told you who I thought I was. A god. I just told you. That's who I think I am."⁵⁴ Although met with a great deal of criticism, West's comment acknowledges that since its inception, Hip Hop frequently discusses God, religion, and spirituality as independent and mutually supportive entities. Given the increasing amount of racial, social and political commentary on marginalized communities,⁵⁵ it is vital that scholars offer substantive examinations

⁵² Rex Perry, "Comic Blast From the Past: Hip Hop Heaven" *Girls Gone Geek* accessed February 23, 2018, <https://girls-gone-geek.com/2010/06/28/comic-blast-from-the-past-hip-hop-heaven/>

⁵³ Robert Bernard Hill, *The Strengths of Black families* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

⁵⁴ BBC Radio 1, "Kanye West. Zane Lowe. Full Interview," 2013, *YouTube* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DR_yTQ0SYVA, Accessed April 1, 2018.

⁵⁵ Peter McLaren, "Gangsta Pedagogy and Ghetto-centricity: The Hip-Hop Nation as Counterpublic Sphere" in *Revolutionary Multiculturalism* eds. Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 2018) 150-191.

regarding how racial, economic and social inequities have been experienced and challenged via Hip Hop.

What do Hip Hop artists say about religion, and Hip Hop? Two of the most influential Hip Hop artists of all times had very different views. The late Christopher Wallace (commonly referred to as “The Notorious Big” or “Biggie Smalls”) (May 21, 1972 – March 9, 1997), makes the following comment, “When I die fuck it I wanna go to hell. ‘Cuz I’m a piece of shit it ain’t hard to fuckin tell. It don’t make sense to go to heaven with the goodie goodies. Dressed in white, I like black Timbs and black hoodies.”⁵⁶ This statement suggests heaven as the ultimate reward for those who embody a superior moral character (i.e. “goodie goodies”), Wallace’s acknowledgement that his earthly activities disqualify him from heaven, and heaven as the embodiment of white purity. Therefore, he challenges religion’s belief that entry to heaven is contingent on certain actions.

Contrastingly, another Hip Hop legend speaks of God and religion in a way that is both personal and global. During an interview with Vibe Magazine, the late Tupac Shakur (June 16, 1971 – September 13, 1996) offers this perspective:

I'm the religion that to me is the realist religion there is. I try to pray to God every night unless I pass out. I learned this in jail, I talked to every God (member of the Five Percent Nation) there was in jail. I think that if you take one of the "O's" out of "Good" it's "God", if you add a "D" to "Evil", it's the "Devil". I think some cool motherfucker sat down a long time ago and said let's figure out a way to control motherfuckers. That's what they came up with-the bible. Cause if God wrote the bible, I'm sure there would have been a revised copy by now. Cause a lot of shit has changed. I've been looking for this revised copy-I still see that same old copy that we had from then. I'm not disrespecting anyone's religion, please forgive me if it comes off that way, I'm just stating my opinion. The bible tells us that all these did this because they suffered so much that's what makes them special people. I got shot five times and I got crucified to the media. And I walked through with the thorns on and I had shit thrown on me and I had the thief at the top; I told that nigga "I'll be back for you. Trust me, is not supposed to be going down, I'll be back. I'm not saying I'm Jesus but I'm saying we go through that type of thing every day. We don't part the Red Sea but we walk through the hood without getting shot. We don't turn water to wine but we turn dope fiends and dope heads into productive citizens of society. We turn words into money. What greater gift can there be. So I believe God blesses us, I believe God blesses those that hustle. Those that use their minds and those that overall are righteous. I believe that everything you do bad comes back to you. So everything that I do that's bad, I'm going to suffer for it. But in my heart, I believe what I'm doing in my heart is right. So I feel like I'm going to heaven.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Christopher Wallace, “Suicidal Thoughts” *Ready to Die* (Bad Boy Records, 1994).

⁵⁷ VIBE Magazine, “2pac Talking about His Belief in God and Religion,” *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnmLl6Fm1MM>, Accessed March 10, 2018.

Looking at the world through Hip Hop's eyes without any predefined notions enables scholars to conceptualize the fluidity of worldviews and the life of Hip Hoppas. Tupac does not confine "religion" to one particular community, Nation of Islam, Five Percenters or Christians but that which particularly speaks to and address his and others like him struggles. This is a powerful conception of the world because this means that whatever one believes in, it has to bring real life change by freeing the yoke of White Supremacy and transforming the existence of those who experience oppression.

Another perfect example of Hip Hop's fluid worldview is that of Lauryn Hill. In Ralph Watkin's essay "From Black Theology and Black Power to Afrocentric Theology and Hip Hop Power: An Extension and Socio-re-theological Conceptualization of Cone's Theology in Conversation with the Hip Hop Generation" identifies Hill as a socio-theologian within Black theology and presents an Afrocentric/African centered hip hop. His perspective primarily builds from *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998). However, Cheryl Lynette Keyes in *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (2002) discusses Hill's "references to the Rastafarian concepts of Zion and Jah."⁵⁸ It is important to note that Ralph Watkins, The Peachtree Associate Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary, positions her alongside Black theology and recognizes her as a theologian of sorts. Whereas Cheryl Keyes, Professor of Ethnomusicology at UCLA who specializes in Black and popular music and gender brings forth her connections with Rastafarians. Their intellectual training shapes how they examine and present Hill; this methodological and theoretical approach limits our understanding of Hill and her worldview.

She now identifies as Ms. Lauryn Hill. In an interview posted on YouTube on March 11, 2017 conducted in Africa, Ms. Hill receives a query regarding *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0* being cryptic (and in many ways Lauryn Hill herself). She responds by saying that *Unplugged* "was cryptic because I was sharing things with the world that she hadn't understood yet."⁵⁹ In the same interview, she shares, "I'm expressing to you what's revealed to me as it's revealed to me."⁶⁰ Ms. Hill's statement elucidates the importance of allowing individuals and communities to have fluid worldviews. We are not arguing directly with Watkins or Keyes, rather, we contend that their perspectives highlight a valuable piece of the puzzle. By moving towards a boundary-less notion guided by a specific discipline, scholars of religion and Hip Hop can highlight new perspectives often missed.

⁵⁸ Cheryl Lynette Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 161.

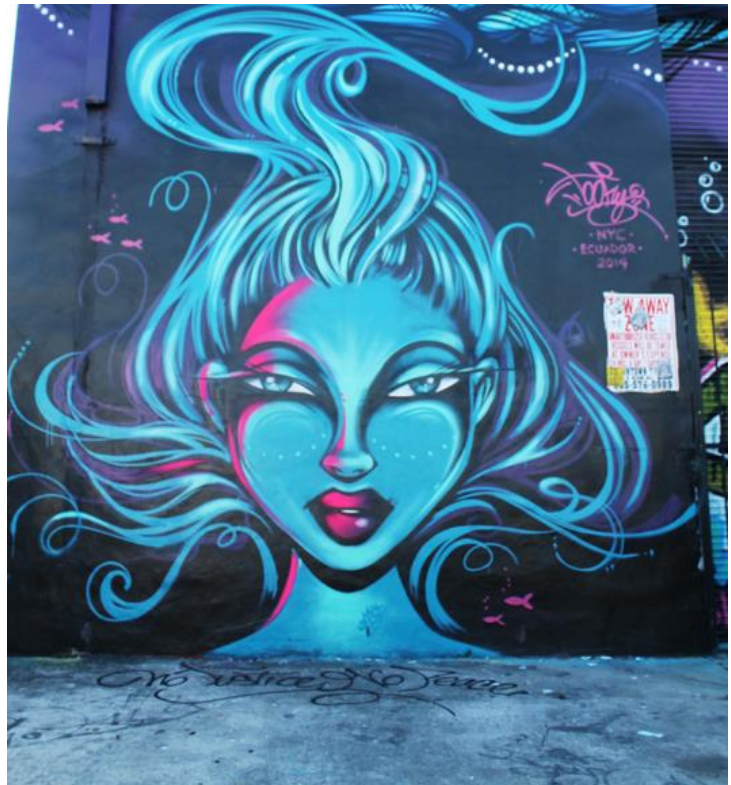
⁵⁹ Manufacturing Intellect "Lauryn Hill Interview, 2000," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POBogwWhKN8>, Accessed May 5, 2018.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

"I lost my religion but I found God."⁶¹ Lecrae's lyrics represent the views of many Hip Hoppas. Graffiti/street artists and member of the Few and Far graffiti crew, Maria "TooFly" Castillo reveal how Hip Hoppas are against religion and UK rapper Sara Little indicates that "spiritual" and "spirituality" does not adequately account for her worldview. Jessica Pabón-Colón in "Writin', Breakin', Beatboxin': Strategically Performing 'Women' in Hip-Hop" (2017) discusses the Few and Far graffiti crew painting event at Art Basel Miami. In her explanation of TooFly's work she states: "Holding court at the top right section of the wall, TooFly's azure and blue-green Amazonian goddess, adorned in tribal patterning, stares softly into the space before her, looking into the future with determination and grace."⁶²

Here is the picture of the work that Pabón-Colón described and TooFly placed on her website.⁶³ She wrote this statement under this same picture:

BANG! – Done. With all that was going on I felt I needed to dedicate this piece to communities around the world who were protesting against police brutality. These are not peaceful days we are living in, Art Basel is a bubble and we were caught up in it. Unaware of what was on TV, radio, or social media. My state of mind these days is peaceful and in tune with nature, and the flow of life, however everywhere around the world it's chaos. Gotta keep trying to create more love in the world but until then if there's no justice there will be no peace!⁶⁴



A close examination at the bottom of the picture will reveal that she wrote "no justice no peace" on the ground. When Harris asked her about her religious views, she stated: "I don't believe in religion. I prefer to follow spiritual practices that are in harmony with

⁶¹ Lecrae Moore, featuring Breyan Issac, "River of Jordan," *The Shack: Music from and Inspired by the Original Motion Picture* (Atlantic Records, 2017).

⁶² Jessica Pabón-Colón, "Writin', Breakin', Beatboxin': Strategically Performing 'Women' in Hip-Hop," *Signs* 43, no. 1 (2017): 175.

⁶³ Maria Castillo granted us permission to publish this picture.

⁶⁴ Maria Castillo, "GRAFITERAS," August 18, 2017 Oakland, CA, Accessed April 10, 2018 <http://www.tooflynyc.com/life/category/few-far-women/>.

nature. Nature is my truth and only guide.”⁶⁵ TooFly expresses her stance against religion while taking a stance to allow nature to guide her. She points to nature on her webpage and in her interview with Harris. From our stance, “spiritual practices” does not mean the same as spirituality. TooFly recognizes her art and the way she lives her life, much like Tupac, as finding peace in the midst of chaos. Her worldview of getting in touch with nature and spreading love provides meaning to her in a world that Black and Brown folks experience state sanctioned trauma.

When Harris interviewed UK rapper Sara Little, he asked her specifically about religion and if she would recognize herself as spiritual. Little has a complicated view of religion. She does not believe in any particular religion but her partner is a non-practicing Muslim; as a result, she does not bash Islam. At the same time, similar to Tupac, she believes that “there's dope life lessons and skills included in many religious teachings.”⁶⁶ In reference to specifically being spiritual: “I wouldn't say that word myself. I don't really know why, it just doesn't seem to describe my relationship to a worldview. I find that finding the words to express how I do feel in this respect is difficult.”⁶⁷ Just like Ms. Hill, Little does not have a nice and neat worldview that she can clearly articulate.

It is precisely the views of TooFly and Little as to the reason why we need an “and” for the third entity. While they both compare to Pac and Ms. Hill, all four of their worldviews are different. TooFly says she follows spiritual practices, but what does that “spiritual mean?” Little explains that “spiritual” does not capture that worldview and, in fact, it would be difficult to find one word that does. Little and Pac recognizes the benefits of religion while Lecrae raps and Ms. Hill mentions in her interview that the particular religion and institutionalization of Christianity actually turns people away from God. Therefore, we provide those seven broad categories and contend for religion and Hip Hop *and*.

Special Issue Outline

This special issue addresses how religion and Hip Hop highlights the experiences of marginalized Black and Brown folk, within and outside of the United States. Since heaven gives meaning to earthly experiences and creates an ethos that allows individuals to deal with earthly pain, disappointment, and suffering, Cassandra Chaney focuses on heaven. In “Is There a Heaven for a Gangsta?: Hip Hop, Spirituality, and Heaven,” Chaney uses phenomenology to conduct a content analysis on the lyrics of twenty-four Hip Hop songs to identify how Black male Hip Hop artists discuss heaven. In particular, this work examines the extent that Black Hip Hop artists create a heaven that reflects their racial experiences, demonstrates their belief in God and/or a Higher Power, as well as their need to communicate with God and/or a Higher Power.

⁶⁵ Travis Harris, *Interview of TooFlyNYC*, Mario Castillo, April 8, 2018.

⁶⁶ Travis Harris, *Interview of Sara Little*, April 9, 2019.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Furthermore, Black male Hip Hop artists' expressions of heaven highlight their need to seek the direction of God and/or a Higher Power, motivates them to create positive change in their communities, and perceive heaven and/or the afterlife in ways that are based on their earthly relationships and experiences.

Dwight Radcliff, in his essay, "Hip Hop Hermeneutics" addresses how the Hip Hop culture shapes and heavily influences Black preachers. Instead of relegating Hip Hop to a tertiary role, particularly regarding the African American experience, a Hip Hop hermeneutic uses this culture as the lens through which one can read and understand scripture as well as the depth to which one truly relates to the multidimensional spirit of the Black experience. Essentially, because they experience similar periods of growth, maturity, change, success, and failure as Hip Hop, Black preachers possess a deep, committed, affinity with this culture. This Hip Hop hermeneutic categorically allows them to interpret scripture in unapologetic ways that make sense to them as well as enthusiastically relay an imagery that is common to the people to whom they communicate.

Since Hip Hop is global⁶⁸ and, as Sarah Little reveals, Hip Hoppas outside of the US do not have the same worldview as those in America, we include a manuscript that speaks to the culture in Central and South-Eastern Europe. In "Religion and the Youth of Romania: A Preliminary Study," Oana-Alexandra Chirilă and Cassandra Chaney examine how the young audience of Romania responds to the spiritual and religious-oriented lyrics in Hip Hop music. They question if this genre, apart from an alternative lifestyle, could be a means of education towards religious tolerance.

In "The Messianic Zeal: A Case of Radical Aesthetics in Black Cultural Production," Daniel L. Williams examines work by popular artists D'Angelo, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar and 2pac Shakur to highlight their connection to messianic symbolism, which integrates the discursive ideologies of Nat Turner, W.E.B. Dubois, and multi-layered representations of Hip Hop. Understanding these ideologies allows individuals to understand and appreciate how the historical marginalization of Africans fosters the current narrative conviction of the world's most prolific cultural producers, namely Hip Hoppers, emcees, authors, and athletes.

Consider the paradoxical representations of Compton-based Hip Hop artist Kendrick Lamar and the Chicago-based Hip Hop artist, Kanye West. In "Kendrick Lamar's Collapsing of Hip Hop Realness and Christian Identity," Matthew Linder

⁶⁸ Angela Selena Williams, "(W)raps of Consciousness: Articulating Women's Rights through Hip Hop in the Middle East and North Africa Region." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2017. James G. Spady, H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli, *Tha Global Cipa: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness* (Philadelphia, PA: Black History Museum Press, 2006). H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim and Alastair Pennycook, *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

situates Lamar's work within two concepts: *imago dei* and sincerity. Fundamentally, these spiritual conceptions highlights the salience of a neo-secular sacred aesthetic, which opts for sincerity over authenticity, making the aforementioned concepts ideal to speak to life in poor Black and Brown urban spaces, and Hip Hop.

In his work, "From Yeezus to Pablo: An Existential Theology between God, Blackness, and Being," Shea Watts highlights how West simultaneously wrestles with his human and divine states, commonly referred to "Yeezus," "black god," "new slave," and "Pablo" (Paul). It is within this delicate balance that Lamar, West, and other Hip Hop artists comment on the world in which they live, realize their own identities, help others come to a realization of self, and impel others to change the world in which they live.

Hip Hop Scholar, Waqas Mirza, provides a critical review of Alejandro Nava's recent tome, "In Search of Soul: Hip-Hop, Literature, and Religion."⁶⁹ Nava, Professor of Religious Studies at Arizona State University, received his introduction to Hip Hop through Professor Eric Michael Dyson. Since that time, Nava has distinguished himself as a reputable pupil of this genre and has produced an insightful interdisciplinary book that will appeal to scholarly and lay audiences.

Conclusion

The common thread that runs throughout many of the worldviews of Hip Hoppas is the desire to encounter something that has meaning in the midst of systemic oppression and suffering. We are very aware of the time we live in; as Black academics, the ivory tower does not exempt us from suffering. As a Black women and men in the diaspora, we long for home. This longing intertwines with a home that we cannot even adequately describe. The combination of systemic oppression and homelessness that we express aligns with the perspective of many Hip Hoppas. This is why Pac asked, "is there a heaven for a G." This is also, why, like Ms. Hill, we do not have a static view of the world. Even between the three editors, we do not all agree on our worldview but Hip Hop does bring us together. It was Chaney's idea to have this special issue because she recognized that in the midst of that longing, religion and "*and*" opened the door for us to talk about subjects that Hip Hop had been talking about. Our hope is that this special issue will spur on the discussion and invite scholars of religion and Hip Hop to explore the *ands* that religion does not adequately describe. This special issue is dedicated to all Hip Hop pioneers who are gone too soon, Hip Hop supporters, as well as past, present, and future academicians who unitedly, wholeheartedly, and untiringly commit to advancing the intellectual conversation on religion and Hip Hop.

⁶⁹ Alejandro Nava, *In Search of Soul: Hip-hop, Literature, and Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017).

The publication of a special issue requires a tremendous amount of work. Special issues require additional resources than that used to operate the journal. The editors would like to acknowledge those who contributed their work; without their contributions, this special issue would not have come together in the way that it did. We also highlight their work because of the capitalist nature of academia that exploits academic labor. In this relatively small way, we fight back against this exploitation to provide recognition of this work. In addition to scholars Chaney contacted for reviews, we would like to acknowledge those who copy edited and designed the special issue. Their professionalism, promptness, and attention to detail greatly facilitated the publication of *Religion and Hip Hop And*. The copy editors we acknowledge are: Waqas Mirza, Doctoral Candidate at University of Oxford, Dr. Ashley Payne of Missouri State University, Doctoral Candidates Alex Edelstein of UC San Diego and Tasha Iglesias of California State University Long Beach. We are truly grateful for the design of this special issue created by Darryl A. Armstrong who works with The Threaded Zebra Agency and Alexa Bowe, a digital marketing consultant. Another major component of our journal is our website. We acknowledge the work of Laura B. Johnson - lbjdigital.com on jhhsonline.org. Last, but most certainly not least, we express gratitude to Dr. Daniel White Hodge, who wholeheartedly supported our laborious efforts in the publication and marketing of this special issue.

The cover plays a crucial role in this special issue. We were fortunate to find a photo of Topaz's art formerly displayed at 5Pointz. 5Pointz was a legal street art hot spot in Queens. Nic 1 described the purpose of it this way: "The basic principle of this was good versus evil, but it's not what you think."⁷⁰ In November of 2013, Jerry Wolkoff, owner of the building that 5Pointz covered, had it whitewashed and surprised many of the artists whose work was displayed. This actual whitewashing was also symbolic of how White Supremacy tried to destroy an African diasporic practice. Several photographers were able to take pictures of this art before its whitewashing. Because of this story, the purpose of 5Pointz and the message of the music, this picture perfectly conveys the message of this special issue. We are truly grateful for Topaz's artistic ability, resiliency and sharing this gift with us.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Sarah Bayliss, "Art/Architecture; Museum with (Only) Walls," *The New York Times*. August 08, 2004. Accessed July 18, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/08/arts/art-architecture-museum-with-only-walls.html>.

⁷¹ The title of this mural is: Music Is My Religion (Jimi Hendrix Tribute) and the artists of this mural are Topaz and Jerms at 5 Pointz. LIC, Queens. 2012. This piece was a part of the 5 Pointz court case these artists won.

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“Is There a Heaven for a Gangsta?”: Hip Hop, Spirituality, and Heaven

Cassandra D. Chaney

Abstract

A content analysis was conducted on the lyrics of 24 Hip Hop songs to identify how Black male Hip Hop artists discuss heaven. The songs were released between 1993 and 2015 and phenomenology was the theoretical foundation on which the themes were identified. I propose that Black Hip Hop artists create a heaven that reflects their own experiences, values, and traditions, envision a heaven where the weak and oppressed receive vindication from the indignities suffered on earth as well as a way to connect with dead loved ones. Essentially, Black Hip Hop artists' expressions of heaven acknowledge racial experiences, demonstrates their belief in God and/or a Higher Power, as well as their need to communicate with God and/or a Higher Power. Furthermore, Black male Hip Hop artists' expressions of heaven highlight their need to seek the direction of God and/or a Higher Power, motivates them to create positive change in their communities, and perceive heaven and/or the afterlife in ways that are based on their earthly relationships and experiences. This study was led by the following two questions: (1) How is heaven described by Black male artists in Hip Hop? (2) How do Black male Hip Hop artists conceptualizations of heaven shape their perceptions of earthly experiences? An analysis of the 24 Hip Hop lyrics revealed Black male Hip Hop artists described heaven in the following five ways: (a) Heaven as Superior to Earth; (b) Heaven as the Ultimate Reward; (c) Heaven as Reunification with Loved Ones; (d) Heaven as Segregated; (e) Heaven as Synonymous with Sensual Love. Qualitative examples are provided to support each of the aforementioned themes.

Introduction

Many artists have acknowledged Heaven in the Hip Hop community. To illustrate, the above sampling is from "Rapper's Delight," one of the first Hip Hop songs recorded in the United States. Although the release of this song occurs almost forty years ago, since that time, an increasing number of Hip Hop artists have openly discussed their views on heaven, spirituality, and the afterlife during interviews and their music. During an interview, the late Hip Hop artist actor, and activist Tupac Shakur¹ made the following statement regarding heaven: "*I believe that everything that you do bad comes back to you. So everything that I do that's bad, I'm going to suffer from it. But in my mind, I believe what I'm doing is right. So I feel like I'm going to heaven.*"² Through these words, Shakur demonstrates he believes in heaven and makes a connection between one's actions and if one will actually go to heaven, as well as a solid belief that he, in fact, would go to heaven. However, why does heaven appeal to so many people, particularly those that support some form of Judeo-Christianity? Given the increased amount of scholarly³ and commercial interest in God, heaven and the afterlife in best-selling novels such as *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*⁴ and *The Lovely Bones*,⁵ I am aware of no scholars that have specifically examined how Black artists in Hip Hop discuss heaven or how their conceptualizations of the afterlife inform their spirituality.

Significance of the Current Study

There are four reasons why this study is important. First, this study legitimizes the intellectual discussion of heaven within Hip Hop by concentrating on the most difficult experiences of the downtrodden. As stated by Michael Eric Dyson, "The best of Hip Hop culture looks beyond bigotry to embrace the heroic use of words and beats to cast light on the dark places of the black experience and the American soul. At their noblest Hip Hop artists carry the weight of the black and poor in their speech and rhymes and exorcise demons as they encounter them in their minds and in the world

¹ Tupac Amaru Shakur (born Lesane Parish Crooks; June 16, 1971 – September 13, 1996), also known by his stage names 2Pac and Makaveli, was an American rapper and actor.

² Tupac Shakur Quotes (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/300044-i-believe-that-everything-that-you-do-bad-comes-back>)

³ Lewis V. Baldwin, "A Home in Dat Rock: Afro-American Folk Sources and Slave Visions of Heaven and Hell," *Journal of Religious Thought*, Washington, DC 41, no. 1 (1984): 38-57. Hertel, Bradley R. "Inconsistency of Beliefs in the Existence of Heaven and Afterlife." *Review of Religious Research* 21, no. 3 (March 1, 1980): 171-183. Ralls, Mark. "Reclaiming Heaven: What Can We Say about the Afterlife?" *Christian Century* 121, no. 25 (December 14, 2004): 34-39. Monica R. Miller, and Anthony B. Pinn, eds. *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*. Routledge, 2015.

⁴ Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet In Heaven* (New York: Hachette Books, 2003).

⁵ Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones: A Novel* (Boston: Little Brown, 2002).

around them.”⁶ Thus, by focusing on a multitude of Black realities, this study will further legitimize why this musical genre is a credible site for scholarly consideration.⁷ Second, this work deliberately focuses on Black men whose experiences are categorically different from Black women. Specifically, Black men are substantially more likely (than Black women) to be perceived as a threat,⁸ to experience police violence, be incarcerated, and be murdered by police.⁹

Third, this study contributes to and builds on current scholarship that relates to Black spirituality¹⁰ and reveals how descriptions of heaven and spirituality relate to these constructs. In other words, this scholarly work will highlight how Hip Hop artists’ perceive and discuss heaven as well as how their relationships with God and significant others inform their spirituality. Finally, this study juxtaposes earthly experiences versus those in heaven and examines how Black male mortals perceive heaven. Simply put, this study examines why the belief in heaven makes grim experiences on earth easier or more difficult to bear. Fundamentally, this study will answer the following two questions: (1) How is heaven described by Black male artists in Hip Hop? (2) How do

⁶ Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard 'Bun B' Freeman, eds. *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, p. xiv. Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me* (2006). Basic books, 2006. Dave Marsh, *Heaven Was Detroit: From Jazz to Hip-Hop and Beyond*. Wayne State University Press, 2017. Michael Sakamoto, "Flash: Butoh, Hip-Hop, and the Urban Body in Crisis." In *Performing Utopias in the Contemporary Americas*, pp. 71-86 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017).

⁷ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. (New York: Basic Books, 2002). Lindon Barrett, "Dead Men Printed: Tupac Shakur, Biggie Small, and Hip-Hop Eulogy." *Callaloo* 22, no. 2 (1999): 306-332. Alford A. Young, *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity, and Future Life Chances* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸ Dawn Marie Dow, "The Deadly Challenges of Raising African American Boys: Navigating the Controlling Image of the 'Thug'," *Gender & Society* 30, no. 2 (2016): 161-188.

⁹ Bernadette R. Hadden, Willie Tolliver, Fabienne Snowden, and Robyn Brown Manning, "An Authentic Discourse: Recentring Race and Racism as Factors that Contribute to Police Violence Against Unarmed Black or African American Men," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* (2016): 1-14. Adrienne N. Milner, Brandon J. George, and David B. Allison, "Black and Hispanic Men Perceived to Be Large Are at Increased Risk for Police Frisk, Search, and Force," *PloS One* 11, no. 1 (2016); Aymer, Samuel R. "'I Can't Breathe': A Case Study—Helping Black Men Cope with Race-Related Trauma Stemming from Police Killing and Brutality," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 26, no. 3-4 (2016): 367-376. Cassandra Chaney and Ray Robertson, "Armed and Dangerous?: An Examination of Fatal Shootings of Unarmed Black People by Police," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 8, no. 4 (2015): 46.

¹⁰ Cassandra Chaney, "Religiosity and Spirituality among Members of an African American Church community: A Qualitative Analysis," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 27, no. 3 (2008): 201-234. Linda M. Chatters, Robert Joseph Taylor, Kai M. Bullard, and James S. Jackson, "Spirituality and Subjective Religiosity among African Americans, Caribbean Blacks, and Non-Hispanic Whites," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 4 (2008): 725-737. Anthony Reddie, "Not Just Seeing, But Really Seeing: A Practical Black Liberationist Spirituality for Re-interpreting Reality," *Black Theology* 7, no. 3 (2009): 339-365. Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

Black male Hip Hop artists conceptualizations of heaven shape their perceptions of earthly experiences?

Review of Literature

In this section, I provide a brief overview of key scholarship that relates to the experiences of African American slaves and how these experiences shaped their religious practices and conceptualizations of heaven. Included also within this overview is the salience of religion and spirituality for African Americans. Next, I provide the theoretical framework on which this study builds. Then, I describe the methodology utilized in this study. Following this, I present lyrics that support the primary themes revealed in this study.

Religion among Black Slaves

Religion is inherently a part of the African culture and its salience has historical and contemporary relevance.¹¹ According to John S. Mbiti, "It [religion] is by far the richest part of the African heritage. Religion is present in all areas of human life. It has dominated the thinking of African peoples to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations and economic activities."¹² Of note, even when they migrate to other areas, forms of the African religious consciousness remain. Mbiti further notes: "When Africans migrate in large numbers from one part of the continent to another, or from Africa to other continents, they take religion with them. They can only know how to live within their religious context. Even if they are converted to another religion like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately: it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries."¹³

In a society in which they had no social power,¹⁴ the African slave relied on religion as a form of coping. According to Eugene Genovese,¹⁵ religion for the Black slave had the dual purpose of setting a standard for behavior and providing the reason for human suffering: "The religion of Afro-American slaves, like all religion, grew as a way of ordering the world and of providing a vantage point from which to judge it. Like all religion it laid down a basis for moral conduct and an explanation for the existence of evil and injustice."¹⁶ Through religion and a belief a God, the slaves envisioned a heaven where the weak and oppressed would receive vindication or

¹¹ James H. Cone, "God and Black Suffering: Calling the Oppressors to Account," *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 4 (2008): 701-712. Stephen C. Finley, "Homoeroticism and the African-American Heterosexual Male: Quest for Meaning in the Black Church," *Black Theology* 5, no. 3 (November 1, 2007): 305-326.

¹² John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2015), 10.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴ Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976).

¹⁶ Berlin, Ibid, 162.

liberation and a hell where their oppressors would be damned.¹⁷ Essentially, in a world where they held no social power, religion made life on earth bearable for the slaves.

Heaven among Black Slaves

Given their marginalized place on earth, the belief in heaven gave African slaves endurance and hope.¹⁸ In particular, heaven's appeal is more vivid as the slaves more forcibly accept their oppressed state. In essence, heaven's most welcoming features corresponded nicely to all of the inhumane treatment endured by the slaves on earth. While earth was smelly, disorganized, chaotic, and dangerous, heaven was fragrant, clean, beautiful, and safe. Furthermore, although the slaves forcibly eat substandard food and wear tattered clothing, heaven was a place of abundant food, splendid clothes, delightful music, and running water; all luxuries denied so many slaves on earth.¹⁹ Therefore, the African American slave relied on a God that would one day eradicate the racism, sexism, and classism that they experienced.²⁰

Even though White slave masters promote the idea of racial segregation in heaven, the slaves opposed this idea. For example, Afro-American slaves rejected the slave masters' images of a heaven where Blacks and Whites would be separate and of a hell where disobedient slaves would meet their eternal fate. Instead of living their lives in a state of spiritual, emotional, and psychological despair, the slaves shaped a body of thought concerning the afterlife, which reflected their own experiences, values, and traditions. Quite simply, this collective body of thought regarding the life that began after the physical one ended gave the slaves hope and the strength to endure suffering.

Other slaves were confident that even if they were separate from their families and lost their lives, they would reunite with their loved ones in heaven. In the poem "*I'm On My Way*,"²¹ a Georgia slave expressed confidence in the existence of heaven, looked forward to meeting his "brother" in heaven, and being in the presence of Jesus Christ:

*If a seeker gets to heaven before I do
Look out for me, I'm on my way too.
Shout, shout, the Heaven-bound King!
Shout, shout, I'm on my way!*

As one of the cornerstones of the Judeo-Christian belief system, heaven signifies

¹⁷ Lewis V. Baldwin, "A Home in Dat Rock: Afro-American Folk Sources and Slave Visions of Heaven and Hell," *Journal (The) of Religious Thought Washington, DC* 41, no. 1 (1984): 38-57.

¹⁸ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ John Gordon Stackhouse, "Harleys in Heaven: What Christians have Thought of the Afterlife, & What Difference it Makes Now," *Christianity Today* 47, no. 6 (June 1, 2003): 38-41.

²⁰ Eric. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2014).

²¹ Federal Writers Project, *Georgia Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves* (Native American Book Publishers, 1938).

a state of total bliss, happiness, and peace after death.²² Therefore, heaven is the reward for those who have lived a good moral life, while the afterlife reserves for those who, more often than not, have failed to foster good relationships between themselves and others and themselves and God. While religious affiliation and church attendance are main predictors of belief in heaven and the afterlife, a prohibitive attitude toward premarital sexuality, abortion, and divorce laws were significant predictors of belief in the afterlife.²³

Black Religiosity and Spirituality

Although used interchangeably, it is important to make a distinction between "religiosity" and "spirituality." Over a decade ago, Mattis²⁴ categorized religiosity with organized worship and spirituality as "the internalization of positive values" religion as "a path" and spirituality as "an outcome" and religion being tied to worship while spirituality being associated with relationships. However, there are racial distinctions regarding the salience of these constructs. Of note, Taylor and Chatters²⁵ find that when compared with Whites, African American and Caribbean Blacks were substantially more likely than Whites are to report that "both religion and spirituality" are important and less likely to indicate "just spirituality" or "neither" is important. Even given the utilization of self-report measures, African American Blacks are more likely than Caribbean Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites to indicate high levels of being spiritual and spirituality being an important facet of their lives.²⁶ Furthermore, Chaney's²⁷ subsequent work reveals religiosity links to external behaviors and internalized beliefs, and spirituality associates with acknowledging a "spiritual reality" and connecting to God. Furthermore, this scholar also found an interconnection between religiosity and spirituality that embodied having quality relationships with others, being mentally and emotionally connected to God, and doing what God requires.

For many African Americans, spirituality is associated with being involved with a religious organization, having a personal and intimate relationship with God, or

²² Abbott L. Ferriss, "Religion and the Quality of Life," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 3, no. 3 (2002): 199-215.

²³ John G. Richardson and Georgie Ann Weatherby, "Belief in an Afterlife as Symbolic Sanction," *Review of Religious Research* 25, no. 2 (1983): 162-169.

²⁴ Jacqueline S. Mattis, "African American Women's Definitions of Spirituality and Religiosity," *Journal of Black Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 101-122.

²⁵ Robert Joseph Taylor and Linda M. Chatters, "Importance of Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of African Americans, Caribbean Blacks and Non-Hispanic Whites," *The Journal of Negro Education* (2010): 280-294.

²⁶ Robert Joseph Taylor, Linda M. Chatters and James S. Jackson, "Correlates of spirituality among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks in the United States: Findings from the National Survey of American Life," *Journal of Black Psychology* 35, no. 3 (2009): 317-342.

²⁷ Cassandra Chaney, "Religiosity and Spirituality among Members of an African-American Church Community: A qualitative analysis," *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 11, (2008): 201-234.

frequently reading the Bible and relying in it as a source of comfort.²⁸ Even in terms of health management, hope and strength were hallmarks of spirituality.²⁹ In her examination of the salience of religiosity and spirituality among African American congregants and church staff in a Baptist Church in the Midwest, Chaney's³⁰ qualitative study indicated fellowship, evangelism and discipleship, "positive internal experiences," and strong family ties were the greatest benefits of church involvement for Blacks. In addition, this scholar found the provisions of "spiritual guidance," advice, hope, and social supports were the most salient features of religious involvement among church staff. Just as "positive internal experiences" allowed members of the church to best cope with problems, so did the provision of hope. According to Chaney, this hope was provided when members were faced with economic and financial difficulties and allowed them to feel as though they could "get through anything" with God's help.

Theoretical Framework

The current study builds on a phenomenological framework, which focuses on the salience of words in a social context.³¹ According to Lenore Langsdorf,³² "Phenomenology is, at the very least, a choice to study the environment from a situated location is actual experience and oriented toward particular aspects of the spectrum of human activity." Since language is one of the most influence factors in social interaction, a phenomenological approach allows scholars to understand the relationship between what one says or communicates; and the lived experiences of African Americans. As communication is central to the lives of Black men,³³ a phenomenological approach allowed me to examine "particular aspects of the spectrum of human activity," or specifically the relationship between what male Hip Hop artists said about heaven as well as their actual experiences on earth.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach that examined contextual themes present in song lyrics. In order to determine the songs chosen, this involves several steps. The first step involves determining all Hip Hop songs with the word "heaven" in the song title. The second step involved expanding the selection criteria, when appropriate. Since several songs specifically discussed heaven yet did not specifically use the word

²⁸ Bush, Ibid.

²⁹ Dorothy Headley Knox, "Spirituality: A Tool in the Assessment and Treatment of Black Alcoholics and Their Families," *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 2, no. 3-4 (1985): 31-44.

³⁰ Chaney, Ibid.

³¹ Melvin Pollner, *Mundane Reason: Reality in Everyday and Sociological Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

³² Lenore Langsdorf, "Why Phenomenology in Communication Research?," *Human Studies* 17, no. 1 (1994): 1.

³³ Mark P. Orbe, "'Remember, It's Always Whites' Ball': Descriptions of African American Male Communication," *Communication Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1994): 287-300. Lauren Freeman, "Phenomenology of Racial Oppression," *Knowledge Cultures* 3, no. 1 (2015): 24-24.

“heaven” in the song title, I decide to include Hip Hop songs that did not have the word “heaven” in the title. Sole singers and groups were included in the analysis if the song’s title and/or lyrics met the aforementioned criteria. This involves analyzing song titles from the following websites: (1) 20 Hip Hop Songs about Heaven and Hell <http://www.sosoactive.com/hip-hop-songs-about-heaven-and-hell/>; and (2) Second, the complete lyrics of all songs were then analyzed, which were obtained from the following websites: <http://www.aaalyrics.com/>, <http://www.lyrics-now.com/>, <http://www.metrolyrics.com>, <http://www.sing365.com/index.html> and <http://www.songs-lyrics.net/> [The song title, singer or singers, year released, the individual or individuals that composed and produced the song and the genre are provided in Table 1].

Table 1

Song Title, Singer, Year Released, Composer, and Genre

Song Title	Singer/s	Year	Writer(s)/Producer(s)	Genre
<i>When I Get to Heaven</i>	Ice Cube	1993	Writers: O’Shea Jackson; Brian Gallow (P/K/A BRIAN G.); Marvin Gaye; James Nyx Producer: Brian G	Hip Hop
<i>Suicidal Thoughts</i>	Notorious B.I.G.	1994	Writers: Christopher Wallace and Robert Hall Producer: Lord Finesse	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven Ain’t Hard to Find</i>	Tupac Shakur	1996	Writers: Shakur; QD3 Producer(s):	Hip Hop
<i>I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto</i>	Tupac Shakur	1997	Writers: Soulshock; Kenneth Karlin	Hip Hop
<i>I’ll Be Missing You</i>	Puff Daddy and Faith (featuring 112)	1997	Writers: Faith Evans; Sauce Money; Sting; Albert E. Brumley (not credited on album)	Hip Hop

			Producers: Puffy Daddy; Stevie J	
<i>Ask Heaven</i>	Heavy-D (featuring Chico DeBarge)	1999	Writers: Heavy D; Tony Dofat; Erick Sermon; The Ummah	Hip Hop
<i>Tha Crossroads</i>	Bone Thugs N Harmony	1999	Writers: Byron McCane II, Anthony Henderson, Steven Howse; Charles Scruggs Producer: D J U-Neek	Hip Hop
<i>I Miss You</i>	DMX (featuring Faith Evans)	2002	Writer: Earl Simmons	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven</i>	Nas (featuring Jully Black)	2002	Writers: Ajene Griffith (aka "Agile"); Karl Amani Wailoo (aka "Saukrates")	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven</i>	Scarface (featuring Kelly Price)	2002	Writers: B. Jordan, K. West, T. Jones, K. Price, R. Moore Jr. Producers: T-Mix; Kanye West	Hip Hop
<i>Gotta Make it to Heaven</i>	50 Cent	2003	Writers: C. Jackson, D. Wesley, Alla Borisovna Pugacheva Producer: Megahertz	Hip Hop
<i>Is There a Heaven 4 a Gangsta</i>	Master P	2005	Writers: Producers: Master P; Beats by the Pound	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven</i>	John Legend (featuring Kanye	2006	Writers: John Legend and Kanye West	Hip Hop

	West)		Producers: John Legend; Kanye West	
<i>Live In The Sky</i>	T. I (featuring Jamie Foxx)	2007	Writers: C. Harris; K. McMasters Producer: Keith Mack	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven</i>	Underground Kingz (UGK)	2007	Writer(s): Chad L. Butler, Joseph Johnson, Bernard James Freeman Producers: Chad Lamont Butler (aka "Pimp C"); N. O. Joe	Hip Hop
<i>Hip-Hop Heaven</i>	One Be Lo	2007	Writers: 14KT (of the Lab Techs) Producers: 14KT (of the Lab Techs)	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven at Night</i>	Kid Cudi	2009	Writer: Scott Ramon Seguro Mescudi (Kid Cudi) Producer: Kareem Johnson	Hip Hop
<i>Heavenly Father</i>	Fat Joe (featuring Lil Wayne)	2010	Producers: Raw Uncut	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven and Hell</i>	Kendrick Lamar (featuring Alori Joh)	2010	Writer: Kendrick Lamar Producer: Tommy Black	Hip Hop
<i>All Dogs go to Heaven (Nate Dogg Tribute)</i>	The Game	2011	Writer: Jayceon Terrell Taylor	Hip Hop

			Producer:	
<i>I'm in Heaven (When You Kiss Me)</i>	Eminem (featuring 'Lil Wayne and Tyga)	2011	Writer: Eninem Producers: Eninem; Dr. Dre	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven</i>	Jay-Z (featuring Justin Timberlake)	2013	Writers: Adrian Younge; Michael Stripe; Peter Buck; Shawn Carter; Justin Timberlake; Michael Mills; Terius Nash; Timothy Mosley; Jermone Harmon; William Thomas Berry Producers: Timbaland; Jerome "J-Roc" Harmon	Hip Hop
<i>Heaven Only Knows</i>	Towkio (featuring Chance the Rapper, Lido, and Eryn Allen Kane)	2015	Writer: Towkio Producer: Lido	Hip Hop
<i>Black Heaven</i>	Boosie Badazz (featuring J. Cole and Keyshia Cole)	2015	Writers: Keyshia Cole; Torence Hatch Producers: Kenoe; Samuel AsH	Hip Hop

Second, after all songs were identified, the next part of the study involves: (1) identifying whether the song was provided by a solo artist or group; (2) determining the year that the song was released; (3) providing the individual or individuals that wrote and composed the song; (4) providing direct quotes from the songs that directly supported heaven; (5) providing a rationale for why the selected quotes directly support heaven; and (6) running statistical analyses on the aforementioned. The data were entered into a Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and frequencies revealed 12 songs (50% of the total number of songs) were provided by the artist and a

featured singer or singers,³⁴ 10 songs (42% of the total number of songs) were provided by a sole-artist, and two songs (8%) were provided by a group (e.g., Bone Thugs N Harmony; Underground Kings). In addition, the artist wrote three songs (12%), the artist and another individual or individuals wrote 10 songs (38%) and 13 songs (50%) were written by an individual or individuals other than the artist. This systematic approach allowed me to respond to the questions of interest and established the validity and reliability of the research.³⁵

Third, all songs were content analyzed using an open-coding process.³⁶ In order to determine the themes that would serve as the focus of the current study, words and phrases were the units of analysis. This involves a *word-by-word* and *line by line* examination of the complete lyrics of all songs, keeping track of any emerging themes that were present, and using those themes to answer the question of scholarly interest. Essentially, this method allows me to determine the patterns within and between songs as well as identify the themes regarding heaven described in the songs.

To further increase the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of these categories, I create a Word file that includes the song title, author, and complete lyrics of all songs that were included in the study. An outside coder trained in qualitative methods receives instruction to become familiar with the typologies identified by the author, to thoroughly read the lyrics of all songs, and indicate in a separate column the typology identified in all songs. After a 97% coding reliability rate was established between me and the outside coder, it was determined that a working coding system had been established, and thus minimized the likelihood that personal biases from the author informed the outcomes presented herein.³⁷

Presentation of the Findings

There were 24 songs related to heaven. Specifically, an individual or individuals other than the artist wrote ten songs (42%), the artist and another individual or individuals wrote eight songs (33%), and the artist wrote six songs (25%). In addition, seven songs (30%) were produced in the 1990s; 11 songs (46%) were produced between 2000 and 2010; and seven songs (24%) were produced between 2011 and 2015.

Five artists provide a song with the title *Heaven*: (1) *Heaven* by Nas (featuring Jilly Black) (2002); (2) *Heaven* by Scarface (featuring Kelly Price) (2002); (3) *Heaven* by

³⁴ A White male Hip-Hop artist provided one song. Eminem offered the song *I'm in Heaven When You Kiss Me* (2011) (featuring 'Lil Wayne and Tyga). However, he was included in the analysis because both of his featured artists were Black.

³⁵ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³⁶ Anselm Leonard Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, Vol. 15 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).

³⁷ As the analysis of song lyrics did not include interview statements from any of the artists, one must note that the conclusions may not necessarily reflect the actual meaning that was the conceptualization of the writer and/or artist.

John Legend (featuring Kanye West) (2006); (4) *Heaven* by Underground Kingz (UGK) (2007); and (5) *Heaven* by Jay-Z (Featuring Justin Timberlake) (2013). Furthermore, although the majority of artists provide one song (24 artists or 96% of the total number of songs analyzed), Tupac Shakur (4%) produced two songs related to heaven, namely (1) *Heaven Ain't Hard to find* (1996); and (2) *I wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto* (1997).³⁸

A qualitative content analysis of the 24 Hip Hop lyrics revealed Hip Hop artists described heaven in the following five ways: (a) Heaven as the Ultimate Reward; (b) Heaven as Segregated; (c) Heaven as Reunification with Loved Ones; (d) Heaven as Superior to Earth; (e) Heaven as Synonymous with Physical Activities. *Heaven as the Ultimate Reward* exemplified a description of heaven as the reward for having experienced and lived through difficulties on earth. *Heaven as Segregated* exemplified a description of heaven where the marginalized experiences of Blacks on earth is distinctly separate from others in heaven. *Heaven as Reunification with Loved Ones* exemplified a depiction of heaven as the site where those on earth who lost friends and loved ones in death reunite with them in heaven. *Heaven as Superior to Earth* exemplified a description of heaven in which the treatment of Blacks is superior to what is the experience on earth. *Heaven as Synonymous with Physical Activities* exemplified a description of physical (erotic) contact as being tantamount to heaven.

Of the five typologies, *Heaven as the Ultimate Reward* was demonstrated in 5 songs (20%), *Heaven as Segregated* was demonstrated in 5 songs (20%); *Heaven as Reunification with Loved Ones* was demonstrated in 4 songs (16%); *Heaven as Superior to Earth* was demonstrated in 4 songs (16%); and *Heaven as Synonymous with Physical Activities* was demonstrated by 2 songs (8%). [Theme of Heaven, Description of Heaven, Lyrical Examples, and Songs and Singer/s that demonstrate the Theme of Heaven are present in Table 2].

Table 2

Theme of Heaven, Description of Heaven, Lyrical Example, Songs and Singers that Demonstrate the Theme of Heaven

Theme of Heaven	Description of Heaven	Lyrical Example	Songs and Singer/s that Demonstrate the Theme of Heaven
Heaven as Superior to Earth	A description of heaven in which the treatment of Blacks is superior to what is the experience on earth.	"And they won't call me a nigga, When I Get To Heaven" "Hell it hurts just to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>When I Get to Heaven</i> by Ice Cube (1993) • <i>Heaven</i> by Nas

³⁸ Derek Iwamoto, "Tupac Shakur: Understanding the Identity Formation of Hyper-Masculinity of a Popular Hip-Hop Artist." *The Black Scholar* 33, no. 2 (2003): 44-49.

		fathom the thought wishing that I fled the Earth"	(featuring Jully Black) (2002)
Heaven as the Ultimate Reward	A description of heaven as the reward for having experienced and lived through difficulties on earth.	"I gotta make it to heaven, for going through hell I gotta make it to heaven I hope I make it to heaven" "So when I die I hope I live in the sky"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Gotta Make It To Heaven</i> by 50 Cent (2003) • <i>Live in the Sky</i> by T. I. (featuring Jamie Foxx) (2007)
Heaven as Reunification With Loved Ones	A description of heaven as the site where those on earth who lost friends and loved ones in death and/or are reunited with them in heaven.	"See you at the crossroads, crossroads, crossroads So you won't be lonely" "I know you smilin' down up there in black heaven I know you're really proud of me up there in black heaven I know you smilin' down on me in black heaven Thinkin' of you til the day we meet again"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Tha Crossroads</i> by Bone Thugs N Harmony (1999) • <i>Black Heaven</i> by Boosie Badazz (featuring J. Cole and Keyshia Cole) (2015)
Heaven as Segregated	A description of heaven where the marginalized experiences of Blacks on earth is distinctly separate from others in heaven.	"I wonder if it's a heaven up there for real G's For all the niggas in the game, in the game - uhh~!" "And if I die, I wonda if heaven's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Heaven</i> by Underground Kingz (UGK)

		<p>got a ghetto. I wonder if heaven's got a ghetto"</p> <p>"Black heaven is a place where people like me go Up there in black heaven, black heaven"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto</i> by Tupac • Boosie Badazz (featuring J. Cole and Keyshia Cole) (2015)
Heaven as Synonymous with Physical Activities	A description of heaven as being synonymous with physical activities (e.g., sensuality, drug inducement, meditation).	<p>"I'm making love to your mind baby Heaven ain't hard to find"</p> <p>"I'm in heaven when you kiss me Heaven when you kiss me You were sent to me from Wonderland!"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Heaven Ain't Hard to Find</i> by Tupac Shakur (1993) • <i>I'm in Heaven (When You Kiss Me)</i> by Eminem (featuring 'Lil Wayne and Tyga) (2011)

Discussion

Consistent with Baldwin's³⁹ earlier work, Black men in Hip Hop envision a heaven that reflects their experiences, values, and traditions. In particular, they believe in God and/or a Higher Power and look forward to seeing a heaven where the weak and oppressed would enjoy vindication or liberation and a hell where oppressors would be damned. This perspective on the afterlife represents one important example of how slaves fashioned a neo-Christianity.

³⁹ Lewis V, Baldwin, "A Home in Dat Rock: Afro-American Folk Sources and Slave Visions of Heaven and Hell," *Journal (The) of Religious Thought* Washington, DC 41, no. 1 (1984): 38-57.

Heaven as the Ultimate Reward

Inherent to the Judeo-Christian belief system is the desire to be in the presence of God and heaven as the ultimate reward. In *Gotta Make it to Heaven*, 50 Cent shared how his near-death experience (“Been to ICU once, I ain't going again”) and the sudden deaths of many of his friends (“First Zee got murked [murdered], then Raw got murked [murdered]. An homies still in the hood, why he ain't getting hurt”) motivated him to pray to God (“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”) and desire to go to heaven as a reward for a challenged life on earth (“I gotta make it to heaven, for going through hell, I gotta make it to heaven I hope I make it to heaven”). One might ask, “What is hell?” Well, for 50 Cent, hell is being in an intensive care unit (ICU) and losing “homies” or good friends “in the hood” to street violence. Even still, Black-on-Black crime was a reality that he was not sure whether he should accept, change, or deal with to the best of his ability (“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”). Thus, in a chaotic world, keeping heaven foremost in his thoughts helped him achieve and maintain serenity on earth.

Heaven is also the reward for caring for one’s family and seeing these ones again. In *Ask Heaven*, Heavy D acknowledges the sacrifices that his parents made for him (“Mom and dad, bustin they ass, 14 years, In the night they would pass, each other, Tryin to raise six of us - one sister, four brothers, Two deceased, laid to rest, And I miss you cats, what I wouldn't give to bring you back, To fill the void that you left in my heart, Your last breath really tore me apart, And I'm sorry if I never said I loved you enough, I truly did”) yet believed they will be waiting for him in heaven (“Ask, heaven, heaven - is there room for me? Cause I believe, that's where you'll be, Waiting for me, at the end of a stairway to heaven”).

In addition, Black males that long for better conditions on earth will be satisfied when they reunite with loved ones in heaven. In *I'll Be Missing You*, Puff Daddy and Faith (featuring 112), reminisced about the sudden passing of their good friend and husband, Biggie Smalls.⁴⁰ Even though his death was untimely (“I'll be missing you, Thinkin' of the days, when you went away; What a life to take, what a bond to break, I'll be missing you”) these artists were confident that Big is watching over them from heaven (“It's kinda hard with you not around (yeah); Know you in heaven smilin' down (ehh); Watchin' us while we pray for you; Every day we pray for you”) and when they die, they will be reunited with Big again in heaven (“Somebody tell me why, One Black Morning; When this life is over; I know I'll see your face”). Of note, those on earth “pray for” Biggie, which may suggest that they hope that even though he engaged in inappropriate behaviors on earth, he will finally find God’s favor in heaven.

⁴⁰ Christopher George Latore Wallace (May 21, 1972 – March 9, 1997), better known by his stage names The Notorious B.I.G, Biggie, or Biggie Smalls, was an American rapper.

Religiosity and Heaven

Some Black males touted religion as the basis for hope and compared religious experiences to being in heaven. In *Heaven*, Scarface (featuring Kelly Price) proudly declares that he is serious about religion ("Listening to different scriptures, they teach on God, and if you ain't never met him, don't speak on God, I'm serious about religion, this just ain't no song"), his firm belief in the Holy Spirit that positively changed his outlook on life ("And the voice is much louder than the voice you thought, was the voice of the holy spirit, you'll change your life when you hear it, and the next morning you wake up and the world will look lighter, the grass greener and the sun brighter"), and how his life changed when he allowed God in his life ("I know the feeling firsthand, I've witnessed the sight, when I allowed the lord to come in my life, and it was like heaven"). In the wake of asking forgiveness for his sins ("I ask him forgiveness for every sin I commit, hoping he gone let me stay on his list, I'm trying to get to Heaven") this Black male is aware that God communicates directly to him through His holy spirit.

In the tune *I Miss You* by DMX (Featuring Faith Evans), this Black male Hip Hop artist dedicated this song to his deceased grandmother. This woman used to encourage him ("You used to say 'Don't worry, it's gone be ok'"), give him needed discipline ("I remember the time when I was like, ten; crept up in the neighbor's yard, yeah, being hardheaded; you told me that I would get it; you said it and boy, did I get it) did so with love ("But after you spanked me, you hugged me, kissed me on my forehead, and told me that you loved me, and I saw that it hurt you more than it hurt me") but prayed to see his grandmother again ("I and like when everything comes to an end, I pray that I go to heaven to see you again, amen"). In *Da Crossroads*, the group Bone Thugs-N-Harmony openly wondered why death occurs ("Can somebody anybody tell me why? Hey, can somebody anybody tell me why we die, we die?"), lamented the murder of a family member that was murdered in front of his home ("I miss my uncle Charles y'all, And he shouldn't be gone, in front of his home") as well as confirmed that they would see him and others in heaven ("See you as the crossroads, so you won't be lonely").

Condemnation of Religion in Hip Hop

Not every musical offering heralds religion. Case in point: In *When I Get to Heaven*, Ice Cube criticizes Christianity and Catholicism ("Four hundred years of getting' our ass kicked, by so-called Christians and Catholics"), the reason why many attend church ("The church ain't nothin' but a fashion show"), and the end of racism ("And they won't call me a nigga, When I Get to Heaven"). In these lyrics, Ice Cube placed religion in a social and historical context. Even though Black people in America are more religious than other racial groups,⁴¹ historically, Whites that oppressed the

⁴¹ Cassandra Chaney, "Religiosity and Spirituality among Members of an African American Church Community: A Qualitative Analysis," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 27, no. 3 (2008): 201-234.

slaves proudly touted themselves as Christians.

In support of the lyrics offered by Ice Cube, Nas also condemns the behavior of many professed-Christians. He began *Heaven* (featuring Jully Black) by questioning the motives of those who are religious and wondered whether they would change their thoughts and behaviors if they had a glimpse of heaven ("If Heaven was a mile away), would I pack up my bags and leave this world behind? (If Heaven was a mile away), or save it all for you? (If Heaven was a mile away), Would I, fill the tank up with gas and be out the front door in a FLASH"). In particular, Nas's condemnation of religious leaders that "do the devil's work" by sexually molesting children ("I know you heard the noise, Preachers touching on altar boys, Sodomizing not realizing God is watching before the Lord, How can they do the devil's work?), and engaging in promiscuous acts ("A man giving another man head in church") causes him to regret his existence on earth ("Hell it hurts just to fathom the thought wishing that I fled the Earth."). Thus, it seemed that a critical incongruence between what is said and what is actually done in the name of religion caused Nas to wonder whether those that promote heaven would actually see it themselves. Other Hip Hop artists believed religion in itself, is not a conduit to heaven.

In *Heaven* (featuring Justin Timberlake), the Hip Hop mogul Jay-Z question whether individuals have seen heaven ("Have you ever been to heaven? Have you ever seen the gates? Have you bow down to your highness? And do you know how heaven taste?"), and admitted to losing his faith in religion ("That's me in the corner; that's me in the spotlight; Losing my religion"). It was interesting that Jay-Z reiterated the same negative assessment of religion that was initially offered 25 years earlier by the alternative rock band, R. E. M. in the song, "Losing my Religion."⁴² Similarly, in *Heaven Only Knows*, Towkio (featuring Lido, Eryn Allen Kane & Chance The Rapper), took seriously his role ("It's my job to make them think, and make music that they feel") and only heaven is aware of what the course of his life will be ("Where the end will go? Will I ever know? Heaven only knows"). Instead of promoting religious beliefs that support the Judeo-Christian belief in heaven, these artists believe it is their "job" to provoke critical thought and create their own spirituality,⁴³ separate from religion.

Intense Longing for Heaven

Like the previous artists, T. I. is saddened by earthly realities and deeply longs to see heaven. In *Live in the Sky* (featuring Jamie Foxx), he discusses how the feelings

⁴² "Losing My Religion" is a song by the American alternative rock band R.E.M. The song was released as the first single from the group's 1991 album *Out of Time*.

⁴³ Robert Joseph Taylor and Linda M. Chatters, "Importance of Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of African Americans, Caribbean Blacks and Non-Hispanic Whites," *The Journal of Negro Education* (2010): 280-294. Robert Joseph Taylor, Linda M. Chatters, and James S. Jackson, "Correlates of Spirituality among African Americans and Caribbean blacks in the United States: Findings from the National Survey of American Life," *Journal of Black Psychology* 35, no. 3 (2009): 317-342.

associated with losing loved ones (“I like to dedicate this song to anybody who every lost somebody, to the grave, to the streets, to the jail cell, I done been in situations where I done had to cope with all three you know what I’m saying, I feel like the only thing I ain’t done yet is die you know...”) motivates him to remember the afterlife (“Just remember where you live while you’re here ain’t half as important as where you’re gonna live when you leave”). Also, this Hip Hop artist is hopeful that despite “life’s ups and downs” that he will live in heaven (“So when I die I hope I live in the sky.. All my folk who ain’t survive, may they live in the sky... Tell God I wanna fly and let me live in the sky...”). In addition, T. I. mentions many of the unique social ills that affect Black people in America, namely being murdered in front of family members (“My cousin Toot ain’t have to die right in front of his son and his wife, He lost his life struggling over a gun”), death due to a drug overdose (“Over-dosed on heroin died at 22”), and inequities in the legal system that render harsh penalties to Black men (“That’s the way the game structured for real niggas to suffer”). Since he has no control over these realities, he looks forward to being in heaven, a place where these earthly experiences would no longer exist.

Spirituality and Heaven

Other Black males in Hip Hop recounted physical and/or spiritual experiences that make heaven real. In *All Dogs go to Heaven (Nate Dogg Tribute)* the Game paid tribute to this influential Hip Hop pioneer. Until they enter heaven, Nate Dogg⁴⁴ and those that emulate him, smoke marijuana (“All dogs go to heaven, Til then (smoke weed everyday”), reminisce on those they lost (Easy-Z and Tupac), accept the inevitability of death (“No-one escapes death or drives to heaven in a Benz, But one things for sure, everybody gotta go”), and contemplate why God would allow someone so young to die (“Damn, he was only 41 so I’mma get high and just drink til this 40 done, But I really wanna cry, shit I really wonder why good n-ggas gotta die”). The desire to mentally, psychologically, and emotionally temporarily numb themselves from current pain may be the impetus for their meditation, alcohol consumption, and getting high. Although its message is hidden, in *Heaven at Night*, Kid Cudi detailed the experience of meditation, drinking alcohol (“Like how you feel if you drink some bud light, followed by Jag”) and getting high from drugs during the night hours (“You feel so free like you’re high as a kite”). For Cudi, the surreal experience of getting high (“Focus on floating, your focus is tight”) was tantamount to being in heaven (“Heaven at nite...have you ever been to heaven at night?”).

In contrast to Kid Cudi’s use of meditation and drugs to get to “heaven at nite,” other males want physical and emotional connection with a member of the opposite sex. In *Heaven Ain’t Hard to Find*, Shakur earnestly spoke to a prospective lover. While he is aware of his reputation as a ladies man (“Although I know you’ve heard about my reputation”) he is interested in making love to her body (“Touch me and let me activate

⁴⁴ Nathaniel Dwayne Hale (August 19, 1969 – March 15, 2011), better known by his stage name Nate Dogg, was an American rapper, singer, and actor.

your blood pressure, This thug pleasure helps the average man love better”), but most importantly, her mind (“I’m making love to your mind baby, Heaven aint hard to find”). Like Shakur, Eminem (featuring ‘Lil Wayne and Tyga) in the song *I’m in Heaven*, spoke of sensual love (“I’m in heaven when you kiss me, show me how you miss me, Take me with you back to Wonderland”) as well as how attached he feels to his lover (“You capture me with a stare, I’ll follow you anywhere”). Thus, for these men, the physical love of a female can help mitigate many of their everyday stress.

While other artists spoke about their impending death, in the song “Hip-Hop Heaven” ONE.B.L.O chronicled how quickly his life could end. In this musical rendering, this artist wakes up with his family (“I feel asleep early, woke up this mornin right side of the bed; The rest of the fam was sleep, I didn’t want to wake ‘em”) and creates music (“I’m in the mood for makin some music and so I hit the basement; When it comes to writin this song, I’m not as patient”) and engages in a hard day of work; only to eventually learn he is a ghost (“On my way to the room, I hear my lady on the phone; She moan, cryin and dyin inside, feelin alone; Almost finished packin, said she gotta get goin; Need a change and she can no longer live in this home; I stand lookin confused, with boxes before me; I called her name three times, she only ignored me”), is deceased and now resides in Hip Hop heaven (“She held a newspaper in her hands, it read: “Local rapper, One Be Lo, age 30, found dead”; I’m in hip-hop heaven”). Thus, it seemed that a fleeting existence on earth makes the appeal of a Hip Hop heaven all the more necessary.

Essentially, Black males in Hip Hop create a spiritual connection to heaven and present heaven as an alternative to earth that is welcoming, loving, and eternal. As previously mentioned, one of the ways they do this is by recasting heaven as a place where they will one day see their loved ones and everyday racism on earth do not exist. For example, Ice-Cube was confident that he would not called a “Nigga” in heaven and Bone Thugs N Harmony looked forward to seeing their loved ones “at the crossroads,” or the junction between heaven and hell. However, embedded in every dream of life beyond death for these Black men also lied the threat of discontinuity. Thus, the living wondered whether they would retain their earthly identities in heaven, whether they will possess the memories, desires and affections that made their earthly lives unique, or the kind of heaven they would actually see.

A Racially Segregated Heaven

Other males in Hip Hop envisioned a racially segregated heaven. In *I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto*, Tupac described how an absent father (“Was it my fault poppa didn’t plan it out? Broke out left me to be the man of the house”) led to his decision to sell drugs to support his family (“I couldn’t take it, had to make a profit; Found a block, got a glock, and I clocked grip, Makin G’s was my mission, Movin enough of this shit to get my momma out the kitchen”). In addition, Shakur mentions conditions that are “here on earth” such as racism (“I see no changes, all I see is racist faces, misplaced hate makes disgraced races”) and the mass incarceration of Black men (“And ain’t a secret

don't conceal the fact The penitentiary's packed, and it's filled with blacks"). Shakur also discusses police violence on Black bodies in which members of law enforcement are heralded for murdering a Black person ("Cops give a damn about a negro, Pull a trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero") which causes him to wonder "if heaven's got a ghetto" in which the aforementioned earthly experiences also exist in heaven.

In *I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto*, Shakur used the indefinite article "a" to describe a heaven that is uniquely dissimilar from the heaven that most envision and hope to one day see. In *Is There a Heaven 4 a Gangsta?* Master P gave homage to Tupac Shakur ("Rest in peace Tupac") and acknowledged Shakur's belief in heaven ("Tupac said there's a heaven for [for] a G"). Moreover, after admitting his regret for past behaviors ("Damn, I done did some messed up stuff") and wondering whether there is a resting place for murders like him ("But I wonder if there's a restin place for killers and gangsta niggaz like me"), he chronicles the rationale of those who began to sell drugs and who later lost their lives to those they trusted ("Look into the eyes of a killa, neighborhood drug dealer, From ghetto, hero swore he wouldn't be the next nigga, to lose his life in this dope game cocaine, He told me don't trust nobody; his best friend was the trigger man"). Ironically, like Ice-Cube and Nas (featuring Jilly Black), Master P admitted that religious organizations are "full of killers and drug dealers." Therefore, it seems that "killers and drug dealers" have the capacity to embrace their religious and spiritual selves. Lastly, Master P acknowledged the Black men on Death Row in various prisons ("All y'all niggaz on Death Row, Lake Charles, Shreveport, New Mexico; R.I.P. nigga; Mississippi, Texas, Alabama, Atlanta") and wished that, in spite of their misdeeds, these men would see heaven.

Other Hip Hop artists envisioned an alternate heaven. In *Heaven* by Underground Kingz (UGK), these artists wondered whether a heaven exists for "real G's." Throughout this song "real G's" were identified as relegated members of society, namely drug dealers, murderers, and strippers ("I wonder if it's a heaven for all the drug dealers; for all the hot boys, strippers, and the thug niggas"). Of note, this group acknowledged the existence of Tupac Shakur ("I wonder if they got a spot for all the Tupacs"), and gave a nod to Black men who are incarcerated ("Dawgs in the pens and the boys with the weed spots"). Similar to the assessment of religion that was offered by Ice-Cube, this group also condemned the hypocrisy of many church leaders ("The preacher talkin' 'bout us in the pulpit; Behind closed doors he be on some gay shit"). Perhaps most noteworthy was the desire of this group to create an alternative heaven for themselves and others ("But on the cool you know what else I hope is true; they got a heaven for me and got a heaven for you, too").

Kendrick Lamar recounted a multitude of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that made the Black experience fundamentally difficult. In particular, in *Heaven and Hell*, Lamar discussed the distrust between Black men and women ("Niggas hatin', bitches hatin'"), gun violence as the cause of the untimely deaths of Black youth ("Babies dyin', bullets flyin'"). He also discussed police scrutiny ("Helicopters, police sirens") and

untruthful religious leaders (“preachers lying”) as well as a large number of external stressors (“Genocism, criticism, unemployment, racism; Burning buildings, AIDS victims, cancer killin’ no cure; Oil spillin’, turmoil, poverty stricken) and police violence against Black bodies (“police brutality kickin’”). Like Boosie Badazz, Kendrick also gave tribute to influential African Americans like Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (“Malcolm laughing, Martin laughing,”) as well as earthly adversaries Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls (“Biggie spittin’; Pac is rapping). In this alternative heaven, the late Gregory Hines entertains (“Gregory tappin’”), children and angels rejoice (“Children playing, angels praying”) on golden streets (“14 karat golden streets”) and soul food is consumed (“Collard greens, red wine, potato yams, turkey legs”).

Other Black male Hip Hop artists mentioned an alternate heaven. For example, *Black Heaven* clearly indicated the existence of a heaven that highlighted the pride, talent, and accomplishments of notable African Americans. In that track, Boosie Badazz (feat. Keyshia Cole & J. Cole) is confident that he will be a member of this alternate heaven (“Black heaven is a place where people like me go”) and enjoy being in the company of famous African Americans in music and politics such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Houston, Rosa Parks, Bernie Mack, Richard Pryor, Trayvon Martin, Tupac Shakur (2Pac), Biggie Smalls, Easy-Z, Nate Dogg, Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson, Johnny Taylor, Rodney King, James Brown, Jackie Neal, Tooki Williams, Mac Dre, and Bob Marley. Essentially, Boosie Badazz is confident these influential African Americans are pleased with his accomplishments (“I know you smilin’ down up there in black heaven, I know you’re really proud of me up there in black heaven, I know you smilin’ down on me in black heaven, Thinkin’ of you til the day we meet again”). Consequently, he knows that at the time of his death, he will immediately transport to Black heaven to greet them (“See I know one day when they bury me, I’ll go straight to black heaven, black heaven”). Perhaps after contemplating the inhumane treatment that Blacks in America have endured for centuries, some Black male artists envisioned a racially segregated heaven that confirmed their historical and contemporary realities. Clearly, in a racially segregated heaven, Blacks who reside there make up a congregated throng of artists that create beautiful and harmonious music, eat soul food, and entertain one another for all eternity.

Limitations of the Current Study

This study had three limitations. For one, my focus on Black male artists in Hip Hop limits the generalizability of the findings in this study to Black female Hip Hop artists. Furthermore, that the overwhelming majority of the songs were representative of the Hip Hop genre further limits the generalizability of our findings. Secondly, as the majority of the songs were created in collaboration with or by someone other than the Black male Hip Hop artist, this makes it difficult to determine how much of the artist’s “voice” is present in these songs and how much of that “voice” has been shaped by individuals other than the artist. Lastly, the songs that were analyzed in this study essentially provided a snapshot of how Black males in Hip Hop discussed spirituality

and heaven. In other words, as the majority of Black male Hip Hop artists only provided one song related to spirituality and heaven, it is difficult to determine how their views may have changed or remained stable over time. In spite of these limitations, this study builds on the work of previous scholars that have studied spirituality and heaven by providing a qualitative analysis of Hip Hop songs, and placing them within a broad, social context.

Directions for Future Research

There are four ways that scholars can expand the current work. First, future research can examine how Black female Hip Hop artists discuss spirituality and heaven. Future work in this area may determine that the individual and collective perspectives of Black women in Hip Hop is distinctly different from Black men. Thus, a comparative content analysis could be the methodological base to examine these divergent perspectives. Second, future research can *qualitatively* examine how African American male artists in Hip Hop have discussed spirituality and heaven in public television and radio interviews. Since music provides a brief window into how Black males feel about spirituality and heaven, interviews may be an especially valid way to tap into the racial/social consciousness of Black males in Hip Hop regarding spirituality and heaven. Third, future scholars can examine how Black males in Hip Hop discuss spirituality and heaven and how these perspectives are similar and/or different from other music genres, such as Alternative, Blues, Christian, Country, Gangster Rap, Gospel, Neo-Soul, Pop, Rock, and R&B. Finally, scholars can examine the opposite position of heaven, namely hell. Future work in this area may reveal how Black Hip Hop artists' attitudes, beliefs, and emotions regarding hell determine the perception of current realities, as well as projections regarding their future lives.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly suggests that, like their slave forefathers, Black males in Hip Hop perceived heaven to be a welcomed alternative to the many negative experiences they endure on earth. While some males in Hip Hop viewed religion as the conduit to one day seeing heaven, others believed that Blacks should critically examine behaviors done in the name of religion and create a spirituality that links to God and/or a Higher Power. For some, this heaven was the place where they would reunite with their loved ones, yet, for others, this heaven was racially separate from others who oppressed them. As I conclude, I turn attention to the comments provided by the late Tupac Shakur at the beginning of this manuscript. Perhaps Shakur and other Black men reconcile their actions on earth, whether good or bad, with the knowledge that heaven exists and they will one day see heaven. Furthermore, this reality is apparent regardless of whether they use religion, spirituality, or a combination of both these constructs to

⁴⁵ David C. Reisman, "The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 116-119. Tymn, Michael E. "Making Sense of a Horrific Hell and a Humdrum Heaven." *Journal of Religion and Psychical Research* 24, no. 2 (April 1, 2001): 102-110.

receive endurance, focus, and hope. Like the Georgia slave that looked forward to meeting his “brother” in heaven, Black males in Hip Hop look embrace their reward of better conditions, seeing loved ones, and being in the company of one another in heaven.

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Hip Hop Hermeneutics: How the Culture Influences Preachers

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Abstract

“Hip Hop Hermeneutics” essay lays out findings of current research into how Hip Hop culture has been formational for African American preachers, and how that culture informs their preaching. There is a generation of preachers leading congregations today that have grown up with Hip Hop. Hip Hop culture has left an indelible mark upon them; just as the church has. How does the cultural influence of Hip Hop affect their preaching? Hip Hop hermeneutics is the response put forth by this article. This article traces the practice and theology of early African American preachers, the work of James Cone in Black Liberation theology, and Womanist theologians to demonstrate how Black theology has always included the Black experience as part of its theological norm. The article then posits that the next generation of Black theology must take into account that Hip Hop is also part of that Black experience, before going on to delineate a Hip Hop hermeneutic. A Hip Hop hermeneutic is a particular way of reading scripture that embraces the honest and raw fullness of the Black experience.

Introduction

The decline of congregations and mainline denominations in the West has been a source of scholarly attention.¹ During this same decline, however, there have been two rather drastic increases: (1) the meteoric rise and worldwide influence of Hip Hop and (2) the increase in small communities of Christian believers ‘doing life together,’ but refusing to accept the term ‘church.’ Hip Hop’s influence resounds with global populations who also experience poverty, oppression, and injustice. This is not to debit or credit the universality of music, but rather to assert that the appeal goes beyond a genre of music. Additionally, with the recent passing of the giant-of-a-theologian, Dr. James Cone, it is timely and befitting to discuss the frontiers of Black theology and the future vitality of the church. An examination of Hip Hop hermeneutics allows us to focus on the future implications of Cone’s work for the next generation of preachers.²

The nexus of Hip Hop culture and theology is a rich vein that has yet experienced exhaustive mining. Although scholars have done much work in our current era of interdisciplinary studies and contextualized theologies, the nuances of this nexus are still a source of debate. Mapping this terrain will take years of scholarship to come, but proves to be exciting for cultural and theological scholars alike. In this landscape, one area has received less scholarly attention. Namely, how has Hip Hop culture been formative for African American preachers; and how does this understanding inform their preaching, or their engagement of the mission of the Christian church?³ These are the questions at the core of “Hip Hop Hermeneutics.”

“Hip Hop Hermeneutics” posits that preachers, deeply impacted by Hip Hop culture, develop a Hip Hop hermeneutic – a lens or way of reading scripture.⁴ This Hip Hop hermeneutic is the same type of work that early African American preachers engaged in when formulating their own interpretation of scripture and is a continuation of the legacy of Black theology. Hip Hop hermeneutics is a theological inquiry that pushes for the inclusion of Hip Hop within the Black experience and reveals how Hip

¹ For a brief overview, see Bolger, Ryan K., *The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

² Dr. James Cone is The Father of Black Liberation Theology. One of the hallmarks of his work is validating that the lived experiences of Black people in America is a legitimate source, and theological norm for doing theology.

³ Ralph Watkins’ book, *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007) discusses how the church can reach the Hip Hop generation. Watkins’ work primarily gears toward reaching youth and utilizes both theological and sociological frameworks. Daniel White Hodge asks missiological and theological questions of Hip Hop, although there is still a focus on youth. See Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010); “No Church in the Wild: Hip Hop Theology and Mission,” *Missiology: An International Review* 41, no. 1 (2013): 97–109. The work in Hip Hop Hermeneutics deals directly with scriptural interpretation and the formation of adult preachers.

⁴ For the sake of this essay, includes those who willingly engage Hip Hop content in their preaching and those who may not outwardly engage the culture, but still confess to its influences in their adolescences and adulthood.

Hop can be a source of theological interpretation. The work of early African American preachers was primarily rooted in a foundational understanding of what Cornel West called the Black experience.⁵ This experience is an affirmation, and specific engagement, of Black culture,⁶ rooted in an African worldview that rejected Western dualism and honored Blackness at a time when White, American Christianity refused to ascribe any value to Black bodies other than that of chattel. The Black experience also depends upon an understanding of the incarnation that posits Jesus as experiencing human life as an oppressed Jew in first-century, Roman-governed Palestine. This understanding of the Black experience was key for the first generation of scholars working with a theology from a Black context.

Hip Hop is culture; it is a form of the Black experience. It is much more than music, attire, and rappers. In fact, such a reductionist view completely ignores that even when one considers Ting-Toomey and Chung's understanding, one must consider Hip Hop a *culture*, at minimum, due to its processes of sharing, interacting and transmission of ideas.⁷ Those who study Hip Hop closely have concluded that Hip Hop is indeed a culture,⁸ wielding power and influence. The cultural status of Hip Hop has also been declared and cemented by pioneering scholars like Tricia Rose, who defines it as a cultural form,⁹ and M. K. Asante, who affirms that Hip Hop is a cultural expression of Black America.¹⁰ Making this statement is not an epiphany by any measure, and the statement only appears to be blasphemous when persons of color begin to highlight and affirm the seedbed of their own cultural formation. White scholars have long studied the impact and effects of culture on people, theology, and preaching.¹¹ Hip Hop culture

⁵ West refers to the totality of this experience; from lived experience, to critical and philosophical thought, to jazz and poetry. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, Anniversary Edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 2002).

⁶ While Cornel West seems to conflate the two (experience and culture), Cone separates them. Cone details that the Black experience is the emotions and impact of what is lived. Culture, he holds, is the "creative forms of expression," James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1970), 28.

⁷ Ting-Toomey and Chung offer the following definition of culture: "A learned meaning system that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, meanings, and symbols that are passed on from one generation to the next and are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community." Ting-Toomey, Stella and Leeva C. Chung, *Understanding Intercultural Communication* (Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury, 2005), 376.

⁸ Daniel White Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*; Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2004); Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Kindle (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

¹⁰ Although, Asante's focus is also on youth. M.K. Asante, *It's Bigger than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

¹¹ See Crouch, Andy, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008); Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); Eddie Gibbs, *LeadershipNext: Changing Leaders in a*

informs and influences preachers, who lead congregations today. Like the unreleased songs of Tupac or Prince, it is important that we tell these stories.

In this essay, I will briefly describe the methodology employed. I will then provide a socio-historical context of the Black Christian faith as a way of discussing the first generation of Black preachers in America and provide a model. Next, the essay will demonstrate how contemporary preachers are following this model before moving on to describe Hip Hop hermeneutics in detail.

This essay views contemporary preachers as a continuation of the lineage of African American preachers who have deeply engaged and understood their context and their faith. Further, this work hopes to be a faithful continuation of the tradition of Black Liberation and Womanist theologians that developed their own Black hermeneutic as they also relied heavily on the Black experience and a rejection of Western constructs of womanhood. This essay builds on work done by recognized scholars like Ralph Watkins. Watkins has already published the next iteration of Black theology will be conducted by the Hip Hop generation.¹² The thesis of Watkins' work here is that this new wave of Black theology will be much more Afrocentric than previous drafts. Watkins' focus is on identifying socio-theologians, locating them outside of the church, and delineating the African locus of their search. Unlike Watkins' work, this essay focuses on those practitioners within the church. Both projects are placing the future trajectory of Black theology firmly within the Hip Hop generation. Watkins' publication contends that the Hip Hop socio-theologians are refusing Western constructs of God and reaching to African roots in order to begin their God talk. These Western constructs, worldviews, and philosophical language have made non-Western, indigenous peoples feel alien or "homeless" to the good news of the Gospel.¹³

This rejection of Western worldviews and orthodoxy is exactly what Watkins says is happening with Hip Hop socio-theologians. This is exactly what this essay describes in the first sections with the early African American preachers. This is exactly what Cone described in his early work. Moreover, this is exactly what is happening currently with preachers who are engaging Hip Hop culture. Following Watkins' and Cone's rejection of White, Western worldviews, contemporary preachers are utilizing Hip Hop culture to connect with their audiences, make theology relevant, question the hypocrisy of American religion, and rail against the continued suffering of the Black experience. For these preachers – just as Cone described – there is no accurate and vivid description of the Black experience without Hip Hop culture. A Hip Hop hermeneutic

Changing Culture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005); James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) et al.

¹² Ralph Watkins, "From Black Theology and Black Power to Afrocentric Theology and Hip Hop Power: An Extension and Socio-Re-Theological Conceptualization of Cone's Theology in Conversation with the Hip Hop Generation," *Black Theology* 8, no. 3 (2015): 327–40.

¹³ Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).

is necessary for the continuation of the Black theological exercise and the revival of the local church.

Methodology

I took a qualitative methodological approach in completing research for “Hip Hop Hermeneutics.” I chose this method because my goal was to provide a “...credible, rigorous, and authentic story...[giving] voice to people in their own context.”¹⁴ In order to identify participants, basic criteria were established. All participants had to be 1) adult, 2) African American preachers, 3) with some knowledge of African American culture and Hip Hop, 4) who were engaging Hip Hop to some degree, and 5) have developed some theological opinion about Hip Hop. Male and female participants were from the West Coast, East Coast, and Midwest. Guided by qualitative methodology I engaged in semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Twelve interviews were complete during this research. The questions posed to each participant focused on three areas. The first area allows the participant to share their connection to Hip Hop via their memories and descriptions of Hip Hop. The second focus was on the participant’s formation as a preacher – their influences, sense of calling, and vocation. The last category was a synthesis on the first two. The participants respond to questions regarding their theological engagement or opinion of Hip Hop. Also, and key for this essay, had they considered how Hip Hop influences or informs their preaching. The indexing of these data into categories simultaneously accounts for the myriad of responses and major similarities.

Early African American Preachers as Model

Historians, theologians, and scholars like Gayraud Wilmore, Dwight Hopkins, Delores Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, and others have done foundational work chronicling the history and faith of African Americans.¹⁵ Much of their work illuminates that the forced arrival of Africans on American soil did not rid them of their African roots, identity, faith, or worldview. Will Coleman’s work, *Tribal Talk*, recount some of the complexities and variety found in African religious practices and their influence on African American Christianity?¹⁶ Coleman notes the birth of African American Christianity was not simply an uncritical supposing of an existing, racist, oppressive faith. Wilmore and Hopkins attest these early Black believers identified with the themes of liberation found in Christianity, which seemed to feed their pre-existing understanding of a God that created Blackness as part of the beauty of diversity God intends upon the creation of humanity in the divine image; not as a curse in response to

¹⁴ David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998), 1.

¹⁵ I will use African American and Black interchangeably. One should not assume any difference with either usage. In addition, I will cite the works of these authors as this essay progresses.

¹⁶ Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (University Park, PA: Penn State, 2000).

sin.¹⁷ The early pioneers of Black, Christian faith are engaging in complex and advanced contextualization. At least this is what academia would later label this process – or perhaps even syncretism.¹⁸

Gayraud Wilmore and Marsha Snulligan-Haney outline some of the key characteristics of the African American preacher from his genesis.¹⁹ As White preachers, missionaries, and denominations, who hold power within the institutional church, release African American preachers into ministry, it was required that members of the latter group fill several functions. Unlike his White counterpart, the Black preacher/pastor did not usually have full backing and financial support of larger communities and institutions. From its antebellum inception, the role of the African American preacher was both bi-vocational and multi-faceted. There was an expectation that African American pastors be: 1) pastors, 2) fundraisers, 3) educators, 4) community activists, 5) and racial spokespersons.²⁰ As pastors, they were to gather people for worship and preach the gospel message to their congregations. As fundraisers, they raised money to build sanctuaries, to provide for their own families, and to help purchase the freedom of other enslaved family members. Often the pastors (along with the women who served in roles as missionaries and Christian education teachers) were among the only educated people in their communities. The responsibility, then, of educating Blacks fell directly upon them, or the church. These obligations were foreign to White ministers, especially in Presbyterian and Methodist settings, unless they were engaging in mission work abroad. As community activists and racial spokespersons, there was an expectation that Black preachers would lecture and advocate for abolition; humanizing Blacks and lobbying for their improved living conditions and freedoms.

¹⁷ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

¹⁸ Although syncretism often carries a negative connotation, recent scholarship has posited that Christianity is a constant act of contextualization and syncretism. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Rev Ed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009); Daniel Shaw, "Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-First-Century Model for Enabling Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 4 (October 2010): 208–15; Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Kindle (Maryknoll, NY; Edinburgh: Orbis Books; T & T Clark, 1996).

¹⁹ I use the male pronoun here but not out of oversight or a lack of a desire to use inclusive language. The use of the male pronoun for preachers/pastors through the bulk of this essay is a sad, but true, testimony that the pastors and ordained preachers of the time were mainly male. One should note that although Black and African American history does not begin with slavery, the story of the first African American preachers does. This term "African American preachers" describes the African slaves that arrived here and adapted the American Christianity they encountered. The works referenced are Wilmore, *Black Radicalism*; Marsha Snulligan-Haney, *Evangelism among African America Presbyterians* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007).

²⁰ This list expands from Haney's list of three, although the other functions are also in her text. Haney, *Evangelism*, 55-74.

While there were, of course, White preachers who were part of the abolitionist movement, it was particularly the Black preacher's responsibility to affirm to Blacks, and Whites alike, that Black bodies also carried the divine image of God's creation.

The importance of this bi-vocational and multi-faceted model for this essay will become lucid in the proceeding paragraphs. For now, it is important to see this structure, or model, as necessary due to the overall impact of overt racism and segregation limiting the options for African American clergy. One must also note that the faith of the African American preacher was incarnational and holistic. Incarnational in that their faith sprouted from the seedbed of the sociopolitical reality of Jesus' birth, life, and ministry. The Jesus of scripture was born into poverty and oppression.²¹ Jesus' reality, then, was experiencing humanity as a member of an oppressed group during a time of hostile, and often violent, systemic oppression. The preachers' faith was also holistic in that any God, or faith in that God, must be about, "freedom, and justice, and redemption for all humanity."²² Their faith did not fall into Greco-Roman frameworks of spirit and flesh – denying the importance of existential freedoms and liberties. Rather, their faith maintained African characteristics, in that all spheres of life were included and part of their faith.

The model presented here is that of early preachers engaging their entire lived experiences. They did not see their communities and the cultural realities of their life as a separate realm from the church; to be excluded by the preacher and deemed unnecessary for their faith. Rather, they engaged their professions and daily life out of necessity, and out of an understanding that it was not something that tainted the calling of the preacher. This model shows the activity and preaching of these preachers to be rooted in a revelation of a God who understands oppression and violence. This constructed model, of the early African American preacher, holds up for several key figures in Haney's text – as well as information presented by the texts of Wilmore and McMickle.²³ Figures such as John Gloucester (the first African American to be ordained in the Presbyterian church, and an educator and missionary),²⁴ Elymas P. Rogers (a poet and missionary),²⁵ James W.C. Pennington (a trained blacksmith, turned abolitionist lecturer),²⁶ and Henry H. Garnet (an organizer and publisher),²⁷ all reflect this model. Specifically, they demonstrate early African American preachers were holistic in their faith and saw the entire expanse of their lived experience as part of their theological engagement.

²¹ Hopkins, *Shoes*, 35.

²² Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching & Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 51.

²³ Wilmore, *Black Radicalism*; Marvin Andrew McMickle, *An Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2002).

²⁴ Haney, *Evangelism*, 58-59.

²⁵ Haney, *Evangelism*, 58-59.

²⁶ McMickle, *Encyclopedia*, 157-158.

²⁷ Ibid, 141-142.

Each of the aforementioned figures were bi-vocational – working in jobs outside of the Christian ministry to provide for themselves and their congregations, but also seeing their work as tools for their respective ministries. Henry H. Garnett's paper was not an exclusively Christian newspaper, but the articles he chose to write and publish were in agreement with his overall Christian convictions as a preacher. In that vein, he uses the newspaper as a tool to fight against the systemic injustice that he believed marred the image of God in Black humanity. Rogers, also, uses his poetry to dismantle the alleged supremacy of whiteness. Each of these men were African American preachers and pastors who understood that various spheres of life were included in what it meant to preach the gospel.²⁸ They refused indoctrination into the European worldview that created a false binary of sacred and secular, and a tension between the two. These preachers had a deep investment in their African identity. Many of them better understood the plight of those they preached to, through the lens of their other vocations. Their holistic approach to preaching and to missionary work meant that engaging literary, public, arts and justice arenas was not optional – but necessary if they had any hope of improving the lives of believers.²⁹

Wilmore, Hopkins, and Haney suppose, as stated earlier, that part of the reason for this embrace of a holistic approach to mission and preaching was due to the powerful imprint of an African worldview.³⁰ There is not space in this article to delve into a full discussion of African worldviews and how they contributed to the formulation of African American faith.³¹ This however, requires a few words here for the sake of grounding the conversation. Dwight Hopkins is helpful as he declares:

Enslaved African Americans creatively forged their own understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and the purpose of humanity. Through scriptural insights, theological imagination, and direct contact with God, black bondsmen and bondswomen combined faith instincts from their African traditional religions with the justice message of the Christian gospel and planted the seeds for a black theology expressed through politics and culture.³²

²⁸ This has already been noted above but bears repeating here, that this essay is focusing on male preachers in this early model because of the patriarchy of the time and not as a celebration of it. The work of numerous women like Maria Stewart and Amanda Smith were vital to the life of congregations and communities. However, due to the overt patriarchy of the time, they were not allowed to function in the same roles as their male counterparts. Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987); Smith, Amanda, *An Autobiography, the Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist: Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and ... in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India and Africa, as an Independent Missionary*, 1893.

²⁹ See the list at the beginning of this paragraph for specific examples.

³⁰ See also Valerie Cooper, *Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 2012).

³¹ Much more can and should be said about this, but for further treatment see the following works: Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?*; James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, Kindle (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); Spencer, Jon Michael, *Theological Music: Introduction to Theomusicology* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1991).

³² Hopkins, *Shoes*, 13.

Haney points out it is no wonder that many of the early, and even current, African American political figures were, and are, clergy.³³ This model of the early African American preacher still exists today; whether through deliberate retention, societal necessity, or subconscious imprint. This historic model of the role of the African American preacher is vital to the discussion of how African American preachers today are able to engage Hip Hop culture. The activity of engaging the arts, engaging culture, speaking out politically, and educating communities is a rich legacy of Black preaching and Black missionary activity in this country. These concepts did not come to birth during the Civil Rights or Post-Civil Rights eras; they are the legacy of Black Christian faith in this country. This legacy continues in preachers and pastors who engage Black culture – or more specifically for this article, Hip Hop culture.

Contemporaries to the Model

The participants in this study validate that there are African American preachers today, who are thoughtfully engaging Hip Hop. The participants are all practitioners, but there are others doing this same work in the academy. There are many like Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman and Dr. Otis Moss III who function as academic practitioners.³⁴ All, however, seem to be following in the tradition of the model set forth in this work. Returning to the model of the early African American preacher, it is necessary to recall that the engagement of literature, commerce, poetry, etc. done from a decidedly Christian perspective. This is not to say that the literature, poetry, and published articles focused on Christian doctrine. It is, however, an affirmation that those preachers who were writing the literature, poetry, and articles spring from an underground spring of Christian faith that railed against overt oppression in society. Silence or refusal of engagement, when it came to injustice, would have been an affront to their very faith. Hence, social justice was not an optional accessory to Christianity, but part of the very heartbeat of their God. For this reason, the role of the African American preacher has historically called for social and cultural engagement – even at the risk of receiving the negative label of syncretism.³⁵ The barrier between sacred and secular in a more African worldview, as already discussed, is permeable at most and absent at least.

Black preachers today (male and female) who are thoughtfully engaging Hip Hop culture, see Hip Hop as part of the overall Black experience, rather than a music genre one can edit from a playlist or an optional soundtrack to elicit fond memories.

³³ Marsha Snulligan Haney, *Evangelism among African America Presbyterians*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007.

³⁴ That all of these mentioned are practitioners in some way is of vital importance. It shows the continuation of the model into contemporary times. It also shows this constant engagement of the entire lived experience.

³⁵ Although, as said earlier, Christianity is the most syncretistic of all the major religions and potentially the most translatable. In addition, the fear or concern of syncretism would not have come up until later periods of history; not truly being an issue for preachers of the time. See Walls, *Missionary Movement*; Sanneh, *Translating*.

Many of these preachers grew up with Hip Hop; meaning that they, and Hip Hop, went through growth, maturity, changes, successes, and failures together. Essentially, Hip Hop is not some culture 'over there' that can be left to youth or others. It is a vital part of African American culture (or perhaps, more specifically, a subculture), that is part of the very fabric of their being and must be engaged. Further, Hip Hop today is a global phenomenon³⁶ that is part of the reality and experience of countless other people spanning various socioeconomic backgrounds, and multiple generations.

These modern descendants of the early model, much like their ancestors, do not see a contradiction in engaging Hip Hop, as some of their contemporaries may.³⁷ Rather, they readily and passionately discuss how they interpret Hip Hop, and how they understand Hip Hop's impact upon their own lives and those they serve. Some of the respondents spoke of their coming to Hip Hop using Christian and salvific terminology.³⁸ Another group of respondents reported that the emcee and preacher both have a similar sense of calling.³⁹ In this group, they saw the emcee and the preacher both as gifts being created and used by God. Yet other participants see a unifying effect to Hip Hop culture – in that it gives the preacher language and imagery common to the people, they communicate with.⁴⁰

The modern orators, here, fit the model described in key ways. These contemporary preachers are functioning in several roles in their communities. They are engaged in the arts. They are educators and community organizers. They are spokespersons for their faith and for their people. One of the respondents in this study works in primary education; another is a Hip Hop artist. One respondent even uses the poetic books of the Bible and Hip Hop to teach poetry to inner city youth. Another respondent in the Southern California area is a respected advocate and community organizer. These preachers subconsciously – or by the direction of God – follow in the

³⁶ Marina Terkourafi, *The Languages of Global Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2010).

³⁷ It should be sufficient to state here that Christianity is not monolithic in its regard for and approach towards culture. There are many pastors and traditions within Christianity that still hold a European dichotomy of sacred and secular. As such, they interpret scripture as mandating a type of holiness that separates itself from 'secular' culture. To see more of this, see Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption*; Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

³⁸ One female respondent from the East Coast acknowledged that God used Hip Hop to save her life. She ranks the experience of 'coming' to Hip Hop just after her experience of 'coming' to Christ.

³⁹ Several respondents from various regions affirm that both the preacher and the emcee can have a 'calling' from God. Each of those who made this connection went on to describe emceeing and preaching as gifts that are given, and that the receiver has the obligation to use that gift.

⁴⁰ The work of Charles Kraft is important here as he works with communication theory from a missional perspective. His work shows that language is the most important symbol system for humans, as it conveys meaning that goes beyond the words and symbols expressed. Communication, for Kraft, must focus on the receptor. In this case, the preachers are engaging a shared vocabulary and system of symbols that both parties can encode and decode to grasp meaning. Charles H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

footsteps laid before them. They are bi-vocational and multi-faceted. They firmly believe in a Jesus that identifies with their experience and the oppressed.

It is important to note, however, that none of the respondents (thus far) cites African American slave history or missional tradition as their impetus. They all, however, identify (to some degree) with the tradition of Black preaching. Further, they are engaging Hip Hop out of necessity. This means that they see Hip Hop as part of their identity and expression as African Americans. Hence, to deny an engagement of Hip Hop culture would be a denial of self-identity. To see the extent of what I describe in this section, simply peruse the biographies of the bishops of the Full Gospel Baptist Church.⁴¹ There, the reader can see the indelible impact that Hip Hop has made upon the lives of people who are leaders in the Christian community. Alternatively, one can scan the bookshelves (or browse Amazon) and you will find more and more preachers and pastors writing about Hip Hop culture.⁴² Preachers and pastors today, much like the model presented at the beginning of this essay, are relying upon their own Black experience to preach to their congregations. They see their culture and their experience as part of their identity, and not some separate sphere of their reality. Further, many of them are working outside of the church as well as inside. Many of these preachers are artists, entrepreneurs, writers, and scholars who view their engagement in these vocations as a natural extension of their calling. Their ancestors were bi-vocational, or multi-vocational, by necessity. Some of these contemporary clergy are also engaging in other work out of financial necessity, but large numbers of them are doing so out of passion and calling. As such, this cultural engagement with their entire lived experience influences and affects how they see scripture. They do not submit to the European bifurcation of reality. Rather, they engage all aspects of life as part of the Black experience and validate that experience as necessary for hearing and interpreting God's words contained in scripture.

Hip Hop Hermeneutic

Preachers who are engaging Hip Hop are reporting how Hip Hop influences their reading and understanding of scripture. They read the biblical narratives with contemporary, Hip Hop lenses; not as ancient stories disconnected from a present life. Engaging the language of the model presented in this work, these preachers are utilizing their lived experience to interpret and proclaim their faith in Christ.⁴³ For

⁴¹ "About Full Gospel Baptist," *Full Gospel Baptist* (blog), accessed July 14, 2017, <https://www.fullgospelbaptist.org/about/>. No less than three of the executive cabinet members refer to hip-hop culture or hip-hop artists as important aspects of their own experience or identity.

⁴² Smith and Jackson, *Hip-Hop Church*; Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption*; and Hodge, *Soul* have already been mentioned. See also Stephens III, Benjamin and Ralph C. Watkins, *From Jay-Z to Jesus: Reaching & Teaching Young Adults in the Black Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2009); Hudson, Willie, *The Holy Ghost Got a New Dance: An Examination of Black Theology and Holy Hip-Hop in Inner City Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2016) et al.

⁴³ Paul engages within his letters in the New Testament this same work. It is also the same type of master teaching that Jesus engages in; speaking in parables and teaching the masses.

example, one can see the historic friction between the Northern and Southern kingdoms of the Old Testament through the lens of the East Coast-West Coast beef. For example, one can hear the long-suffering biblical Job's declaration that man is but a few days and full of trouble as the tune of Jay-Z's *Hard Knock Life*.⁴⁴

What exactly, though, is a Hip Hop hermeneutic? Dini Metro-Roland, out of Western Michigan University, uses the term "Hip Hop Hermeneutics" in relation to multicultural education.⁴⁵ She uses Gadamer's work on extricating hermeneutics from biblical theology to philosophy to build her framework.⁴⁶ This work, however, is seeking to return the phrase to its biblical context. By including the term "hermeneutic," this work can build upon the tradition of Black theology.⁴⁷ Specifically, this essay builds upon Cone's premier work and definition that a hermeneutic is the "theological norm" that determines how sources are used.⁴⁸ Cone's early work focused on the liberation of Blacks as the hermeneutic, stating: "Any theology that is indifferent to the theme of liberation is not Christian theology."⁴⁹ This then determines the interpretation of scripture for the oppressed as well as the existential realities of Black lives. A Hip Hop hermeneutic, then, is a theological norm that allows an interpretation of scripture and embraces a view of the existential realities of the oppressed and marginalized.⁵⁰

Hip Hop hermeneutics builds on a tripod. The legs of this tripod are fundamentals for Hip Hop hermeneutics and correspond with cardinal elements and procedures for Black theology. First, one must see Hip Hop as part of the Black experience. Second, the Black experience, including Hip Hop, is an established source for Black theological exploration. Third, utilizing Hip Hop in this way is a continuation of the legacy and tradition of Black theology.

James Cone's, *The Spirituals and the Blues* informs the first leg of this hermeneutic tripod. At the time of Cone's writing in the late 1960s and 1970s, he was dealing with the tension between the church and the blues. Contemporary tension between the church and Hip Hop directly correlates to the issue Cone addressed for previous generations. He even argued that the contemporary issue is but a generational

⁴⁴ Jay-Z, "Hard Knock Life", by Shawn Carter, Charles Strouse, Martin Charnin, and Amin Ramoul. recorded October 27, 1998, in *Volume 2...Hard Knock Life*, Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, MP3.

⁴⁵ Dini Metro-Roland, "Hip Hop Hermeneutics and Multicultural Education: A Theory of Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Educational Studies* 45 (2010): 560-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2010.524682>.

⁴⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition (The Crossroad Publishing Corporation, 1991).

⁴⁷ Including Womanist theology.

⁴⁸ Cone, *Liberation*, 37.

⁴⁹ Ibid, ix.

⁵⁰ To use the language of Howard Thurman, the disinherited who constantly live with their backs against the wall. Thurman, Howard, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Reprint (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996).

evolution of the same apprehension.⁵¹ Cone concluded that both the spirituals and the blues flowed from the same fount – the black experience. According to Cone, there are two key issues at hand. First, the blues (and Hip Hop, by extension) are misunderstood. The blues is determined to be of no value to the spiritual life; or, at worst, contrary to it, because of the often-graphic content, the focus on existential realities, and the physical body. Cone contends, however, one must properly understand it as a *secular spiritual*. “They are secular in the sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience.”⁵² This concept of a secular spiritual refers, again, to the discussion of the philosophical, binary Western construct of spiritual and physical; sacred and secular. Cone specifically asserts that, “Africans viewed life as a whole and did not make the distinctions between the “secular” and the “sacred” that are found in Western culture.”⁵³ What Cone puts forth is an alternative to this Western worldview and a more indigenous African view that affirms the body as part of the spiritual.⁵⁴

The blues and the spirituals (by extension Hip Hop and the church), for Cone, flow from the same experiential fountain; they are dependent upon each other. “Indeed, I contend that the blues and the spirituals flow from the same bedrock of experience, and neither is an adequate interpretation of black life without the commentary of the other.”⁵⁵ Hence, they are not at odds nor are they mutually exclusive. In fact, the Black experience is incomplete without both voices. To apply Cone’s language then, Hip Hop is a secular spiritual. This may account for how modern preachers so readily engage it as part of their hermeneutic. This work affirms that Hip Hop extends from the same seedbed as the spirituals. Therefore, it inextricably links to the Black experience, to the church, and to any proclamation from the church.

Hip Hop, then, is a needed voice that completes the Black experience, and flows from the same source as the spirituals. If indeed Hip Hop is part of the Black experience – part of the lived experience of African-Americans – then it must be part of any honest theological exercise built upon or working out of the Black context.

⁵¹ Cone identifies the spirituals as the mother of gospel music. For this research, we will see the spirituals as the mother of the black church in general – and by extension, of black preaching. Cone also identifies the blues as the mother of rap (as he called it at that time) and hip-hop.

⁵² Cone, *Spirituals*, loc 1423.

⁵³ Ibid, loc 587-589.

⁵⁴ Cone is not alone in this view. Travis Harris detailed that Charis Chaney, Charles Howard, and Andre Johnson have also addressed this. Harris concludes that the use of sacred and secular language, with regard to Hip Hop, is unnecessary, problematic, and recommends avoiding this practice. Travis Harris, “Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae’s Contribution to Hip Hop,” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012), <http://jhsonline.org/?termID=130&portfolioID=45#ut-portfolio-items-45-anchor>.

⁵⁵ Cone, *Spirituals*, loc 1416.

The next segment of the hermeneutic tripod requires that Hip Hop be a source for Black theology, due to it being part of the Black experience. The Black experience and/or culture have always been a source for theology in the Black context. Cone rightly asserts in *A Black Theology of Liberation* that, "Culture, then, is the medium through which the human person encounters the divine..."⁵⁶ Cone built his theological enterprise upon the precedence set by Karl Barth and Paul Tillich.⁵⁷ In this, Cone continued the tradition of critical assessment, contextualization, and validation of the Black experience that his ancestors modeled. As Cone worked through this seminal piece, he lists the Black experience as the very first source for Black theology. He is dogmatic that no Black theology can exist without an eye on the reality and suffering of Black life. In Cone's generation, he demanded, "Black theology must speak to and for black people..."⁵⁸

Womanist theology informs the third leg of the hermeneutic tripod. After James Cone and others lay out the foundation of Black theology, a new generation of scholars began asking important questions of Black theology. Scholars like Jacquelyn Grant and Katie Canon assert Black theology had not properly considered the entire Black experience. Canon and Grant highlighted the patriarchal blind spot, detailing that Black women were the oppressed of the oppressed. While Black theology champions the experience of Black men in the church and academia, Feminism was doing the same for White women. Black women, however, did not feel represented by either. Here is where Canon, Grant, and others push the oppression of Black women by their own race due to their gender, and by their own gender due to their race. Hence, Womanist theology affirms all Black bodies. As Grant talks about Womanist theology, she affirms that interpreting scripture in light of the Black woman's context is a source for Womanist theology.⁵⁹ While Grant and Canon critically assess Black theology, they also continue the tradition of affirming the Black experience as a source for a theology done from a Black perspective. Womanist theology forced Black theology to recognize the oppression and suffering of all Black bodies; not just the male heterosexual bodies.⁶⁰ Emilie Townes and Kelly Brown Douglas, then, remind us that the Black experience was not isolated to one voice or perspective.⁶¹ The Hip Hop hermeneutic continues this operational legacy. This Black experience now, however, narrates and curates by Hip Hop culture, as well as those who grew up in a Hip Hop generation. Thus, to take the

⁵⁶ Cone, *Liberation*, 23.

⁵⁷ Both of which Cone says would agree on the importance of culture; though to different degrees. See Cone, *Liberation*.

⁵⁸ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997)118.

⁵⁹ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, 1st ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).

⁶⁰ Also, see Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995); Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

⁶¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); Emilie Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil & Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

Black experience seriously, one must consider Hip Hop in any interpretation of scripture.

Relevance for Black Preaching

Henry Mitchell and Cleophus LaRue ground Black preaching in the soil of the Black experience, just as Cone and James Evans have done for Black theology.⁶² LaRue and Mitchell also detail that the lived experience of Black persons is a reality that comes to bear on any reading of the sacred scriptures. This is in concert with what Black and Womanist theology put forth. Olin P. Moyd would add that Black preaching is a form of doing and practicing theology.⁶³ These conditions and experiences play a pivotal role in the preaching event. Henry Mitchell details the importance of a hermeneutic in Black preaching that connects the preacher to the audience:

The best Black dialogues between preacher and congregation that I have studied have been uniformly prone to start with familiar biblical and living materials, which stretch the thinking and increase the insights of the hearers. The familiar is used as a model for understanding the unfamiliar. Minds and spirits are propelled into the unknown along trajectories established by association with previous experiences. At times these dialogues included parables, even as did Jesus. At other times they simply included such colorful descriptions that ancient biblical experiences were entered into vicariously and bridged over into modern life...The Black preacher must be ear-deep in the condition of the people, and out of this comes the easy dialogue between the preacher and the people, whose lives are so intimately close together – so close that the themes which invade the consciousness of the one also invade the other.⁶⁴

The contemporary preachers engaged in this research are doing this work, as their predecessor have. They are developing their own hermeneutic. They are affirming that Hip Hop culture is part of the larger African American culture. Hip Hop is part of the familiar that helps the congregation connect to the unfamiliar. Hip Hop continues to tell the gritty and grimy stories that other cultural products and genres tend to ignore. The preacher that engages Hip Hop does so out of faithfulness to the tradition of Black faith, not out of rebellion to orthodoxy. Although many would argue that an orthodoxy that rejects a Hip Hop narrative, is merely a veiled Western construct that is alien and hostile to Blackness anyway. These preachers maintain that Hip Hop is a powerful voice for the historic and contemporary realities of Black life. As such, these preachers are looking at texts with Hip Hop lenses and engaging a system of symbols and vocabulary that connect them with their audience. When they read the ancient truths of scripture, they hear it in the raspy, feminine voice of MC Lyte, or the storytelling flow of

⁶² James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1975); James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992); James LaRue Cleophus, *I Believe I'll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*, Kindle (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990).

⁶³ Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching & Theology in the African American Tradition*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 102, 106.

Slick Rick. They see the battles and wars of the bible as gang warfare or illegitimate wars fought by power-hungry nations today. They see the oppression and poverty in these divine pages and hear the prophetic lyrics of Tupac and Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five. The minor and major prophets are emcees through the generations calling out as a reminder to God's presence, even in times of rebellion.

Summing It Up

Gayraud Wilmore makes it clear that the Christianity embraced by slaves and former slaves was not simply the faith of slave owners handed down to poor, wretched Negroes. Rather, the faith of these Africans on American soil had undergone a rigorous theological and existential process.⁶⁵ African Americans saw the lack and contradiction in this expression of Christianity and dared to imagine (prophetically and practically) an alternative.⁶⁶ So, then, the first missional activity that we see African Americans engaging in is the work of rigorously engaging and contextualizing a faith that would speak to their cultural and existential realities; validating their own experience. A God of the great by-and-by, that gave no thought to the dignity and deliverance of Black bodies, was no God at all. An African American faith would have to speak to the marred image of Black bodies, the eternal reassurance of Black souls, and the improvement of the conditions of Black life. This is what Haney, Wilmore, and Felder speak. African American faith, from its inception has been concerned with the lived experience. Black and Womanist theologians would continue this tradition in developing their own hermeneutics that affirmed the Black experience. It is easy to assume that this theological thinking and missional activity birthed solely out of a need for survival. This reductionist view, however, does not take into account the deep Christological roots of the incarnation and the understanding of God's image that fed and nurtured this survival.

This essay posits the preachers described herein are continuing the work of the early African American preachers and Black theologians by engaging the total existence of Blacks in order to forge a faith that embraces the divine image God placed in Black bodies. Hence, the next iteration of this historic drive is a Hip Hop hermeneutic. A theological praxis that insists that the Black experience of the Hip Hop generation is just as valid as that of the generations of the blues and jazz. These preachers are serving several functions in their communities and demolishing the traditional Western wall between sacred and secular, that stands firmly in place by Western philosophy and religion. This is not a trend; it is the continuation of the legacy of Black faith. As the theologians, scholars, and practitioners before them have done, they are affirming the Black experience and boldly declaring that it is also part of the process of reading and

⁶⁵ Wilmore, *Black Radicalism*.

⁶⁶ J. Kameron Carter calls this kind of prophetic daring, 'poiesis' – envisioning, imagining, or creating another world. Carter, J. Kameron, "Naked in the Frequency: Christianity's Postracial Blues," 2017.

interpreting scripture. If the church is to thrive in the coming years, especially in African American contexts, it will do so through a Hip Hop hermeneutic.

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Hip Hop, Religion and the Youth of Romania: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

For the past two decades, Hip Hop has attained a significant presence in Romania. The fall of Communism as well as growing social unrest has led a growing number of Hip Hop artists to incorporate strong Orthodox and nationalist messages into their lyrics. However, not all Hip Hop fans advocate this stance. This essay argues for an investigation of how Romanian youth respond to the religious and spiritual lyrics in Hip Hop. This mixed-methods study examines whether Romanian youth gravitate toward “spiritual-oriented messages or religious-oriented messages” and are thus, “hardcore listeners” or “casual listeners.” The results of the study highlight Romanian youth’s support of religious/spiritual Hip Hop as well as the ability of religion to foster tolerance.

Introduction

Hip Hop has been on the Romanian urban scene for approximately twenty years and has shaped public preferences regarding clothing, music, and dancing. However, what is Hip Hop? Some definitions include, but are not limited to "a social political movement created in the late 70's"¹, "a subculture especially of inner-city youths who are typically devotees of rap music"² or "a type of popular music in which the words are spoken rather than sung and the subject of the songs is often politics or society."³ While these definitions recognize the musical and activist characteristics of Hip Hop, they do not acknowledge its impact. Taking into consideration the four primary elements of Hip Hop (MCing, breaking, graffiti and DJing) and candidates for the fifth (knowledge, fashion, religion, etc.),⁴ we understand that Hip Hop is more than just the sum of its parts, but rather a lifestyle.⁵ From rapping to breakdancing, individuals born and reared during the last days of Communism (or after 1989) manifest their desire for an alternative lifestyle through one or more of the elements of Hip Hop.⁶

However, what, if any, relationship exists between religion and Hip Hop in Romania? There are three reasons why we situate Hip Hop within this European country. First, based on concert attendance,⁷ a significant number of individuals in Romania support Hip Hop. Second, social unrest in Romania has caused many youth to question the salience of the Orthodox Romanian Church. Finally, and related to the first two, Hip Hop's focus on religion and spirituality has led many youth to gravitate toward international artists. The goals of this paper are two-fold. The first goal is to determine the extent Romanian youth respond to religious and spiritual lyrics in Hip Hop. The second goal is to determine whether Romanian youth believe Hip Hop can foster religious tolerance.

¹ Madison P, "Hip Hop," Urban Dictionary. May 14, 2015, Accessed April 22, 2017. [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hip Hop](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hip%20Hop).

² "Hip Hop," Merriam-Webster, Accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hip-hop>.

³ "Hip Hop," Cambridge Dictionary, Accessed April 22, 2017. <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hip-hop>.

⁴ Watkins, Ralph. *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2007), Daniel White Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural* (Downers Grove, IL, 2010), Justin A. Williams, "Introduction: The Interdisciplinary World of Hip Hop Studies," 1-10, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 3.

⁵ We recognize that several scholars have various perspectives on real Hip Hop. We are sharing our definition in order to indicate what it means when we use the term Hip Hop in this work.

⁶ Although "Hip Hop" generally describes the whole culture, for the rest of the article we use the terms "Hip Hop" and "Rap" interchangeably. We acknowledge the existence of break dance and graffiti scenes in Romania, but they do not represent the object of our study.

⁷ Based on "Concert La Coka Nostra @ Silver Church," *București*, May 25, 2012, for *HipHopLive*, Accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.hiphoplive.ro/poze-la-coka-nostra-silver-church-bucuresti> and "DJ Premier & Bumpy Knuckles - Lansare 'Kolexxxion' @ Atelierul de Productie, București," October 17, 2012, for *HipHopLive*, Accessed December 10 2016, <http://www.hiphoplive.ro/poze-dj-premier-bumpy-knuckles-atelierul-de-productie>.

The Country of Romania

Romania rests in Eastern Europe and neighbors Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria and the Black Sea. This country has been an important factor in both World Wars and is currently a member of the European Union and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization. According to the 2011 census, the population exceeds 20 million, and 12% are in the 15 to 25 year age group. Furthermore, 86.5% of the population declares allegiance to the Christian Orthodox Church. Catholics, Neo-protestants, Muslims and Jews are among the religious minorities.⁸

Recent mass protests⁹ demonstrate the deep fragmentation of Romania, which relates less to majority versus minority status and more to the division within the Orthodox community. Currently, the three most discussed topics¹⁰ relate to a mandatory class on religion, the quota of Muslim refugees Romania is supposed to receive correlated to the construction in Bucharest of both the largest mosque in Europe as well as of the largest Orthodox Cathedral, and the fire in the Colectiv Club.¹¹ In all three cases, the core problem is the significance of the Orthodox Romanian Church as an institution and of Orthodoxy¹² as a faith in the state's process of policy-making. Although the state is constitutionally secular, most politicians appeal to the religious factor in their discourse. When it comes to national or international issues, the media oscillates accordingly to ownership or political affiliation and the Romanian Orthodox Church is either vehement in its speech or completely silent, thus neither giving a coherent discourse. In the midst of this, many young people do not know what to believe or whom to trust. Since Hip Hop can be personal, one may wonder whether this genre can also be an influential platform to assist disoriented youngsters when they most need it.

Hip Hop in Romania

Hip Hop found its place in Romania during the 1990s, after the fall of Communism. At first, it was of foreign origin, imported mainly from the US, but by the

⁸ Population Census, Accessed November 9, 2016, http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/REZULTATE-DEFINITIVE-RPL_2011.pdf.

⁹ See for example Anna Nemtzova, "Inside Romania's Huge Protests Against a 'Get out of Jail Free' Decree," *The Daily Beast*, February 13, 2017, Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/02/13/inside-romania-s-huge-protests-against-a-get-out-of-jail-free-decree.html>.

¹⁰ Regarding religion, based on number of articles/screen time devoted in the media.

¹¹ For more on the tragedy that took place in Colectiv club paralyzing an entire country see "Bucharest Nightclub Fire Leaves Romania Stunned," October 31, 2015, *BBC News*, Accessed November 13, 2016 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34684973>, and Elissa Stolman, "After the Fire: How the Colectiv Tragedy Changed Bucharest," April 1, 2016, for *Electronic Beats*, Accessed November 13, 2016, <http://www.electronicbeats.net/after-the-fire-how-the-colectiv-tragedy-changed-bucharest/>.

¹² When we use the term "Orthodoxy," we are referring to the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church.

end of the decade, a few crews like Bucharest Underground Mafia or Paraziții were already making an impact, establishing a Romanian Hip Hop scene.¹³ While common themes of these artists' lyrics were the rough life on the streets and political corruption, around the year 2012 a high-profile group started incorporating strong Orthodox and nationalist messages into their lyrics. One might wonder whether these messages contribute to the disorientation or stabilization of youth.

In light of this polarization of society and the personal nature of faith, our goals for this work is to determine how much the spiritual-religious oriented messages of Hip Hop influence the youth of Romania. In the subsequent sections, we first outline the methodology and terminology used in this article. Next, we present the findings, which relate to the public's attitude towards imported Hip Hop, as well as their attitude toward Hip Hop produced locally.

Methodology

Because Hip Hop is a global phenomenon, the study seeks to examine the influence of foreign Hip Hop¹⁴ on the young Romanian public. Since Oana Alexandra Chirilă is Romanian, she interviewed individuals who were her age peers, who could share national and international life events. Participation in the study required that individuals be at least twenty years old, be a university student or graduate, and reside in an urban area of Romania. Moreover, Chirilă chose to speak to women and men because, although widely seen as a man's world, KRS-One notes, "Hip Hop belongs to all of us."¹⁵ Furthermore, targeting individuals from urban areas was purposeful because Hip Hop in this region provides better access to this genre, which includes concerts, dance performances or competitions. It was also important for Chirilă to determine if the scene in Bucharest aligns to the rest of the country,¹⁶ as well as whether differences exist between regular and non-regular Hip Hop listeners.

¹³ For more on the origins of Hip Hop in Romania see *Tango-direct din strada ta*, documentary, directed by Tedy Necula, 2009, Accessed November 9, 2016, <http://www.filmedocumentare.com/tango-direct-din-strada-ta>, and *Originile hip hop-ului în România*, documentary, directed by Mario Ovidio Grasso, Accessed November 9, 2016, <http://www.filmedocumentare.com/originile-hip-hop-ului-din-romania>, and "Începutul hip hop-ului românesc," January 14, 2011, blog entry, Accessed on November 9, 2016, <http://istoriahiphopuluiromanesc.blogspot.ro/2011/01/inceputul-hip-hopului-romanesc.html>.

¹⁴ By *foreign Hip Hop*, we mean Hip Hop music produced outside of Romania.

¹⁵ Originally, his message is a call for peace between the West and the East Coasts, KRS-One, *Move Ahead*, Produced by DJ Muggs, *Muggs Presents...Soul Assassins Chapter I* album, Accessed June 7 2016.

¹⁶ Other cities respondents live in are Baia Mare, Cluj-Napoca, Târgu-Mureș and Craiova, which are all university centers.

Participants

The first author interviewed a purposive sample of thirty people from urban areas in Romania. In particular, twenty-two participants (74%) were male and eight participants (26%) were female. In addition, the participants' ages range from 20 to 35 years old. From these, twenty-five were in their twenties and five in their thirties. In regards to education, twenty were university students and ten were university graduates. Their majors differ significantly, from medical schools to theology or history. Furthermore, twelve participants consider themselves *hardcore* Hip Hop heads, while eighteen participants consider themselves casual listeners. Pseudonyms protect the identity of all participants.

Procedure

All interviews occurred April 15 – June 15, 2016. Since not every participant lived in the residential city of Bucharest, Chirilă conducted face-to-face and email interviews. The length of time for interviews was twenty to thirty-five minutes and audiotaped on a cellular phone. The questionnaire has three parts: foreign Hip Hop, Romanian Hip Hop and a few follow-up questions to understand the audience. Questionnaires sent via email took between ten and fifteen minutes to complete. While Chirilă knew some participants personally, she obtained others through snowball sampling. In addition, to make the sample as random as possible, she asked strangers publicly if they would complete the survey. The response rate¹⁷ was high, which may have been because Hip Hop in Romania is generally a peripheral art form. An additional reason may relate to participants' excitement that someone was interested in his or her view of Hip Hop.

Interviews

Foreign Hip Hop. The following four questions relate to foreign Hip Hop: (1) Do you actively listen to religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop? (2) Do the religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop motivate your life in any way? (3) To what extent are you attracted to certain Hip Hop artists due to their religious/spiritual lyrics? (4) Does foreign Hip Hop influence your view of Islam?

As the last 15 years have seen increased global tension between Christianity and Islam,¹⁸ and has given birth to "Islamophobia," we are interested in whether Hip Hop influences perceptions of Islam.¹⁹ Finally, Islam and Hip Hop can jointly effect positive world change. In *Roc the Mic Right*, Samy H. Alim asks, "How has Islam served as a transformative force both in the personal lives and in the public roles of many hip hop artists as community-conscious agents? How has Islam helped to shape their identities

¹⁷ 30 out of 35 individuals participated in the study.

¹⁸ Cassandra Chaney and Wesley T. Church, "Islam in the 21st century: Can the Islamic Belief System and the Ethics of Social Work be Reconciled?," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 36, no. 1-2 (2017): 25-47.

¹⁹ Chirilă is studying the relation between Hip Hop and Islam as part of her Ph.D. Thesis.

and ideologies as human beings in process and practice and their actions as socially and politically conscious Hip Hop beings involved in a movement for change in the world?"²⁰ Thus, we are interested in how the transformative force passes from the artist to the audience and therefore to the world community.

Romanian Hip Hop. The following four questions relate to Romanian Hip Hop: (1) Do you prefer certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics? (2) Do you avoid certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics? (3) Do the religious/spiritual messages in Romanian Hip Hop influence you in any way? (4) If so, which Hip Hop artists' music has influenced you the most?

Supporting Questions. In addition to aspects that were the focus of the questionnaire, Chirilă poses the following three auxiliary questions: (1) Are you usually interested in finding more about the personal life of the artists? (2) In your opinion, does the Romanian public pay attention to the spiritual/religious messages in Hip Hop? (3) In your opinion, can Hip Hop induce or teach religious tolerance?

Terminology

We define the following terms: "spiritual-oriented messages," "religious-oriented messages," "hardcore listeners," and "casual listeners." "Spiritual-oriented messages" refers to lyrics that relate to the need to understand the nature of the universe and the human condition in relation to the divine. This theme does not associate to a particular organized faith. "Religious-oriented messages" refers to lyrics that directly relate to religion, by specifically naming that religion, or incorporating elements of religion into the song.²¹ "Hardcore listeners" refers to individuals that listen to Hip Hop regularly, generally have great knowledge of the subject and the music business, and reject the mainstream. Further, use of the term "hardcore" is appropriate as participants commonly use it. "Casual listeners" refers to those less engaged; do not listen to Hip Hop on a regular basis.

Todd Dedman refers to these categories as "purists" and "peripherals."²² Essentially, Dedman considers all elements of Hip Hop, not just music, and limits the term "purist" to those that, in addition to the criteria met by "hardcore listeners," involve themselves in rapping or breakdancing. Because of this, "purist" does not necessarily apply to our group of interest, as it is irrelevant whether one engages in such activities in this study. On the contrary, the definition Dedman gives for "peripherals," with the required limitation to music, is very much the same as we give

²⁰ H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right. The Language of Hip-Hop Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2006, 22.

²¹ For a detailed discussion of the difference between religion and spirituality, see Chaney (2008), Kadar, Scott, Hipp, Belavich, Butfer, Rye, Cole, Pargament, and Zinnbauer (2015), Clark (2018), Handal and Lace (2017). Kvardordt, Sheridan, and Taylor (2017).

²² See Todd Dedman, "Agency in UK Hip-hop and Grime Subcultures- Peripherals and Purists," in *Journal of Youth Studies* 14, no. 5, (2011: 507-522.

for “casual listeners.” He also makes an interesting observation, one that the interviews support, “The peripherals had a desire to be seen as authentic Hip Hop fans and they understood the need to project an idea of underground integrity, yet they were placing such labels on multi-platinum selling artists and themselves as consumers of such acts.”²³ Keeping in mind the different definitions, for the remainder of the manuscript, we use “*hardcore* listeners”/“purists” and “casual listeners”/“peripherals” interchangeably.

Results

Foreign Hip Hop

Research Question #1: Do you actively listen to religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop? Twenty-seven participants (90%) actively listen to religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop. Three participants (10%) do not listen to foreign Hip Hop, and only support Hip Hop produced locally. **Research #2: Do the religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop motivate your life in any way?** Twelve participants (40%) say Hip Hop’s religious/spiritual messages influence them to improve their lives by modeling their lives on the messages they hear. Of this number, three (25%) were female and nine (75%) were male. When comparing *hardcore* listener/casual listeners, of the twelve that describe themselves as casual listeners, nine (75%) responded negatively and only three casual listeners (25%) responded ‘yes’ to this question. **Research Question #3: To what extent are you attracted to certain Hip Hop artists due to their religious/spiritual lyrics?** Thirteen individuals (43%) listen to certain artists specifically because of their religious/spiritual messages; two individuals avoid certain artists because of their religious/spiritual messages. **Research Question #4: Does foreign Hip Hop influence your view of Islam?** In regard to their attitude towards Islam, eleven participants (33%) consider themselves more tolerant of this religion and want to learn more about it because of Hip Hop.

Romanian Hip Hop

Research Question #1: Do you prefer certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics? Four (13.3%) individuals listen to certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics. **Research #2: Do you avoid certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics?** Fifteen (50%) individuals avoid certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual messages. **Research Question #3: Do the religious/spiritual messages in Romanian Hip Hop influence you in any way?** Six individuals (20%) consider themselves influenced by the religious/spiritual messages in Romanian Hip Hop. From these, three consider themselves influenced negatively and the other three consider themselves influenced positively. **Research Question #4: If so, which Hip Hop artists’ music has influenced**

²³ Dedman, “Agency in UK Hip-Hop and Grime Subcultures- Peripherals and Purists,” 516.

you the most? All six individuals mentioned Cedry2k and Dragonu' AKA 47 as the artists that influenced them the most.

Supporting Questions

Research Question #1: Are you usually interested in finding more about the personal life of the artists? Twenty-one (21) individuals (70%) say they do want to know more about the personal life of the artists whose music they enjoy. **Research Question #2: In your opinion, does the Romanian public pay attention to the spiritual/religious messages in Hip Hop?** Only four individuals (13.3%) believe the public actually pays attention to the spiritual/religious lyrics in Hip Hop. **Research Question #3: In your opinion, can Hip Hop induce or teach religious tolerance?** All participants (100%) believe Hip Hop should teach all kinds of tolerance, including religious tolerance. Thus, regardless of age, sex, city of residence or appurtenance to a certain category of listeners, Hip Hop fans believe that this genre has the power to change minds.

Discussion

As the field of religion and Hip Hop Studies grows, researchers are giving more attention to the roles this genre has in their respective communities as well as how those local scenes integrate with the global phenomenon. Although a strong relationship exists between Hip Hop and the Academy, this is not the case in Romania. While scholars like Dan Rădulescu or Andrei Alexandru Babadac have begun to examine trends within Romania's young population, few scholars examine this cohort, especially in regards to religion and music, particularly Hip Hop. Madigan Fichter's and Adrian G. Matus's works, among others', on rock 'n' roll music and counterculture in Romania during the Communist era are especially pertinent to the current work. Their conclusion of a "psychological need" and of a tradition of religiosity²⁴ can apply to Hip Hop in Romania. First, during the Communist era, due to the atheist nature of the ideology, there was tremendous toleration of religion. Orthodoxy was the only legal denomination, and even members of this Church had met their end in the Communist prisons. Second, the geographical space that is now Romania is one of the earliest to convert to Christianity, tradition stating that the Apostle Andrew had done his missionary work in the region of Dobrudja.

The main goal of this research is to understand how much the religious and spiritual-oriented messages found in Hip Hop music mean to the Romanian *aficionados*. The findings suggest that although some listeners beg artists to stop "infesting Hip Hop with messages about the Church,"²⁵ the majority understand these messages and seek artists who discuss faith and religion in their music. This is logical,

²⁴ Adrian G. Matus, "The Reception of the American Counterculture in Communist Romania," Accessed February 14, 2017, <http://phantasma.lett.ubbcluj.ro/?p=5823&lang=en>.

²⁵ Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 18, 2018, author's translation from Romanian.

as most religions assert seeking a connection to the divine is inherent to the human condition. Romanian youth do not necessarily turn to Hip Hop for guidance, but use the messages in the music to inform their religion and spirituality. In this sense, the situation in Romania parallels other corners of the world. To quote Daniel White Hodge on the American public, “Young persons understood God and Christian sacred scripture with deeper meaning than from leaders labelled as pastors or reverends. Artists such as Tupac...were among some of the spiritual and theological leaders for younger generations, because the story of God ‘is from their perspective and their language.’”²⁶

As it relates to international Hip Hop (produced outside of Romania), the Romanian public’s views are not contingent on gender or age; however, there is a marked difference between *hardcore* listeners and casual listeners. Essentially, purists have extensive knowledge and tend to talk more freely, while peripherals in general, are dismissive and prone to monosyllabic answers. Therefore, these individuals know foreign languages; have an open mind and curiosity, which, as it relates to religion, can translate to tolerance towards others and a hunger for spiritual guidance. While nearly 90% of respondents have extensive knowledge on Romanian Hip Hop, not all of them actually listen to it. However, as it relates to Romanian Hip Hop music, casual listeners appear to be more into it than *hardcore* ones.

Recall that the majority of participants (90%) perceive the spiritual and/or religious messages in foreign Hip Hop, twenty-seven participants (90%) answering they do, which means they hear them and understand them. The other three participants (10%) do not listen to foreign Hip Hop, but only to Hip Hop produced locally. The reasons behind this question are both the possible language barrier and the rapid flow of some artists. Another possible reason may relate to the strong foreign language skills of some individuals, which may enable them to pay great attention to the lyrics in songs.

Of the twelve (40%) that considered themselves influenced by the lyrics, three (25%) were female and nine (75%) were male, which suggests gender is not an influential factor regarding susceptibility to religion or spirituality in Hip Hop.²⁷ Neither is age distribution as positive answers come from both ends of the 20-35 range. We believe this may be because men and women receive the same education and grow up in similar environments. However, this changes when we compare the answers from a *hardcore* listener/casual listener perspective. Of the twelve that describe themselves

²⁶ Daniel White Hodge, “Baptized in Dirty Water: An Ontology of Hip-Hop’s Manufacturing of Socio-Religious Discourse for Contextual Spirituality”, p. 59-73, in *See You at the Crossroads: hip-hop Scholarship at the Intersections*, edited by Brad Porfilio et al, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014, 60.

²⁷ While 75% may seem like a high percentage of males, it is not. The number of female participants was significantly smaller than that of the male participants. Therefore 3 out of 8 is similar to the 9 out of 22, the difference is negligible. Although it is evident that males are more inclined to listen to Hip Hop, there is no evidence that women who listen to Hip Hop are less susceptible to its messages.

as casual listeners, nine responded 'no' to this question (75%) while only three (25%) said 'yes' to the same question, meaning that casual listeners are less inclined to feel influenced by the lyrics.

Gender and age are again dismissible and the purists/peripherals comparison supports the second research question in this study. In particular, responses show great tolerance, a tolerance that does not link to a particular religion or philosophy, but rather, acceptance of any religion specifically mentioned or implied in lyrics. This claim supports participants who attest Hip Hop does not lead them to a particular religion *per se*, but rather, to a more open view of the Divine. To support this, one participant says, "Having been listening to Hip Hop music ever since I was a child, I can say it stirred my interest for a world of the spirit. However, to put it metaphorically, I think that all Hip Hop can do in this world of the spirit is to take you to the first station."²⁸ Another one, thinking about the historical wars fought in the name of religion expresses, "This is what I learned from Hip Hop. To make my own religion in which peace reigns supreme."²⁹

When asked which artists shape their opinion, the two groups that appear most often are Jedi Mind Tricks (with front man Vinnie Paz) and the Wu Tang Clan; however, they also mention Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def), Immortal Technique, Nas or Rakim. The gender/age/listener type division is similar to the one presented before. What is interesting is no one attributes their openness solely to Hip Hop, but rather, to their very own inherent curiosity. While one of them used a beautiful metaphor of a bridge between cultures³⁰ to describe the power of Hip Hop, another simply said, "I did not really need Hip Hop to tell me that Islam is cool. I knew Islam is cool."³¹ Interestingly, some of the people that consider themselves purists, and the 90% who said they perceive spiritual/religious lyrics, have no knowledge of the relationship between foreign Hip Hop and Islam. For example, one-participant remarks "the foreign Hip Hop I listen to does not approach Islam,"³² only to later mention Vinnie Paz as one of their favorite artists. This supports Todd Dedman's observation that peripherals sometimes see themselves as purists in order to gain credibility.

While several (13.3%) listen to certain artists specifically because of the religious/spiritual messages in their lyrics, 50% avoid certain artists for the same reason. This is interesting for a number of reasons. First, there is a dispute over the degree of "coolness" foreign and Romanian Hip Hop have when compared to the other. Thus, it is very hard to find a person that enjoys both Hip Hop genres to the same degree. Second, while none of the participants has an aggressive attitude towards

²⁸ Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 19, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

²⁹ Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 25, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

³⁰ Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, April 21, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

³¹ Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, April 23, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

³² Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 20, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

religious messages sent via foreign Hip Hop, this becomes an issue when it relates to autochthon (or locally produced) Hip Hop. Third, the artists 13.3% enjoy listening to because of their religious and spiritual messages are the same artists that 50% avoid. Nevertheless, who are the Hip Hop artists that most avoid?

The two names participants mention most often are Cedry2k and Dragonu' AKA47. Both artists have been present in the Romanian Hip Hop landscape nearly since its inception and they both began rapping about life on the streets, drug-consumption and political corruption, only to change, embrace Orthodox Christianity, turn their lives around and rap openly about religion. To these they added a strong nationalist message and while no one dares dispute their lyrical skills, the changes create a rift among their fans. This rift is evident as six individuals report the lyrics of Cedry2k and Dragonu's influence them, but three indicate their music has a negative effect on them. What makes this especially noteworthy is many resent the religion preached by these artists, which coincidentally is the religion most learn as children. Positive or negative perceptions of Cedry2k and Dragonu's music largely depend on *how* Hip Hop artists put the religious element into the song. For those that criticize the two, some assert Romanian artists should tone down their speech. Conversely, the other half fully embraces these messages and salutes the artists' manifesto for regaining national Orthodox and Romanian pride. It is important to note that when Chirilă asked the owner and chief publisher of *hiphopdinromania.org*³³ if he ever received negative feedback regarding his posting of news about Cedry2k or rappers associated with him, his answer was "yes, at first, but then people got used to the idea and now they are waiting for the next trend."³⁴

Even though their videos are not being shown on television and their music receives no airplay, Cedry2k and Dragonu' are currently stars of the Romanian Hip Hop underground scene. Given their popularity, The Romanian Orthodox Church have included Cedry2k in their policies to turn youngsters to the Church, inviting him at different events such as conferences, book releases or award ceremonies.³⁵ In addition, his biography appears on multiple blogs dedicated to understanding Orthodox Christianity, promoting him as a role model for the youth.

As Sarah Simeziane notes in her article on Roma rap in Hungary, "Although often linked to race by artists, fans and the general public, Hip Hop seems in fact to be a locus of identification for groups who feel, or seek to be, outside some aspect of

³³ A website dedicated to news from the Romanian Hip Hop scene, interviews with artists, etc.

³⁴ Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, April 26, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

³⁵ For an example of such an event see Augustin Păunoiu, "Premierea Celor Mai Bune Eseuri din Concursul 'Crucea, Semn al Biruinței'," December 16, 2013, *Lumina Newspaper*, Accessed on November 10, 2016, <http://ziarullumina.ro/premierea-celor-mai-bune-eseuri-din-concursul-crucea-semn-al-biruintei-87501.html>.

mainstream culture.”³⁶ For the Romanian Hip Hop scene, it is not a matter of ethnic minorities versus ethnic majority. There is not a single artist that identifies as Hungarian, Roma, Turkish, Arab or Jew. It is not a matter of religious minorities either. Apart from a few that stem from the Protestant environment, no artist raps about Catholicism, Islam or Judaism. Moreover, it is not a matter of gender as females have yet to take the mic. For those who strongly support Cedry2k and Dragonu’, the mainstream culture is one that regards Romania as a country sold to the West (or Muslims) or one that has forgotten its roots, values and history. They identify themselves as the minority that keep these values alive and have the long Orthodox Romanian tradition as their core while their opponents see all these as obsolete.

While few dispute the skills behind these rappers’ lyrics, their religious messages stirred two opposite kinds of reactions. On one side are those that, regardless of their affiliation to Orthodox Christianity or other cults, believe extreme religious and nationalist lyrics can have dangerous effects on people. On the other side are those that salute these messages and propagate them via internet or personal relations. Thus, the two groups do not have favorable opinions of each other. To quote another participant, “It was a weird social experiment that split Romania in half”.³⁷

Seventy percent (70%) of the interviewees indicate they want to know more about the personal life of the artists, which does not relate to gossip but rather to understand what triggers the rapper’s style or just certain lyrics. This means that a majority of listeners of Hip Hop in Romania is interested in the culture on a deeper level, trying to familiarize with it and its vectors, making it more than a superficial affiliation. There is again no notable difference in terms of age or gender, but *hardcore* listeners tend to respond positively.

When asked about their peers, we return to the idea of “the in-group”. Only 13.3% believe the public actually pays attention to the lyrics and therefore pays attention to the religious messages as well. When asked why they believe this, the answers vary from a supposed lack of curiosity of the other for further information to superficiality stemmed from the need to seem “cool,” yet generally lacks depth. The purists are those that have this kind of feelings and the category they are describing is that of the peripherals. From a researcher’s point of view, these terms do not imply a qualitative comparison, but rather, a tool. For the public however, being a *hardcore* listener gives one both authority and superiority over a casual one.

When discussing Hip Hop music produced abroad, the consensus is these messages can have a positive effect by making the listener aware of other religions, thereby respecting them. However, this becomes more complicated when Romanian

³⁶ Sarah Simeziane, “Roma Rap and the Black Train: Minority Voices in Hungarian hip hop,” 96-229, in *Languages of Global Hip Hop*, edited by Marina Terkourafi (London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010) 101.

³⁷ Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 25, 2016, author’s translation from Romanian.

Hip Hop gets involved in the discussion. While foreign Hip Hop might seem to contain scattered philosophical and religious ideas in a pond of something else, today's Romanian Hip Hop is seen to be more or less only about religion, making Romanian equal to Orthodox Christian and creating rifts and therefore barriers within the community. As previously discussed, the minority versus majority struggle that defines Hip Hop to its core is, in Romania, in no way related to ethnic, gender or religious minorities. The minority in this case is the group of people who are trying to protect national and Orthodox values in the face of what they see as an increasingly "westernized" Romanian mainstream culture. On one side there are those who use Hip Hop to broaden horizons and on the other those who use it to restrict them. Add these to the divisions in public opinion and you get a generation that does not fully understand which way to go.

Although one might assume the Romanian audience is a homogenous community that does not pay attention to religious-oriented lyrics, this work reveals youngsters pay great attention to messages regarding religion and spirituality. Therefore, Romania is not a homogeneous community, but rather, one defined by the division between those who embrace music, which promotes and preaches national Orthodox values and those who do not necessarily reject them, but are trying to bring to light other points of view. Therefore, there is a link between Hip Hop and the religious or spiritual affiliation of its audience, a link that is a part of the much greater issue of the role religion is playing in Romania.

Limitations of the Current Study

There are limitations of this study. First, the small sample size does not allow generalizability of the findings to the country of Romania, other countries in Europe or abroad. Second, since the sample was primarily male, the findings of this work cannot be generalized to the other males in Romania, other countries in Europe, or abroad. Finally, as the participants respond to questions regarding Hip Hop music, one cannot generalize the findings in this study to other music genres. In spite of the small sample size, we provide a glimpse of the relationship between the youth of Romania, religion, and Hip Hop and thereby make a valuable contribution to the Hip Hop Studies literature.

Conclusion

We started this inquiry in order to see to which extent the youth of Romania perceive, understand and relate to the religious and spiritual messages disseminated in Hip Hop music and whether or not Hip Hop can be a tool in the struggle for religious tolerance. As this article has demonstrated, youngsters in Romania pay attention to the lyrics and incorporate the messages found therein into their own life philosophies. However, they are more inclined to do so if, rather than receive these messages forcibly, they receive them and allow them to influence them organically. In light of growing tensions between Christianity and Islam, the findings herein attest to individuals'

strong desire to create a spirit of peace. Recall that one participant believes Hip Hop taught him to make his own religion in which peace reigns supreme, giving hope for a global-scale religious tolerance and pointing to the fact that an ultimate vision of the Divine is a concept every religious denomination share.

As Hip Hop continues to grow, it is important that scholars examine the ways that social changes influence how individuals respond to the lyrics in this genre. Moreover, it is important to note that since there is a wide array of religious manifestations and spiritual ideas, rendering a distinction between the two concepts is mandatory. By considering this distinction, in closing, we urge scholars to continue to examine the far-reaching effects of Hip Hop throughout the world.

“All the best, didactic Hip Hop!”³⁸

³⁸ Farewell greeting used by one of the interviewees, Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 3, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

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The Messianic Zeal: A Case of Radical Aesthetics in Black Cultural Production

Daniel L. Williams

Abstract

This essay examines artwork by popular artists D'Angelo, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar and 2pac Shakur and compares their articulations to a larger discourse of messianic symbolism in (black) American popular culture. In this paper, messianic symbolism is a discursive chain of symbols that invoke the Black experience. Artists extend the legacy of earlier representations of black messianism by similarly representing themselves as Jews, saviors or folk heroes with a specific mission to save a world burdened by racial strife and oppression. These qualities manifest in lyrics, album covers, and other late 20th century rhetoric.

Introduction

Why are contemporary artists preoccupied with the messianic? In a genre known for moral shortcomings, conversations related to religion topics are less common especially considering the “secularization of the West.”¹ The messianic paradigm functions beyond religion and encompasses political conviction. This study posits W.E.B. Du Bois as an ancestor of public intellectuals/artists who represent Black American historical circumstances as a messianic experience. The messianic is a common trope among scholars that suggests Jewish culture has a fundamentally different relationship to time than their gentile neighbors. Various black cultural producers to restore meaningful subjectivity to a systematically oppressed ethnic group have used the idea of a messiah. One may view this representation as a tactic of self-fashioning meant to neutralize controlling images of slavery through notions and references to divinity.²

Unlike their contemporaries (Greco-Roman, Persian), ancient Hebrews did not see time as a cyclical, endless cycle, but rather, as moving forward to an end. They were moving toward a goal, or a destiny. This parallels the Western obsession with ‘progress.’ In the United States of America, rendering non-whites to an inferior, second-class social status was the norm.³ Enslaved people of African descent, stripped of human and civil rights, are appropriated from their labor, and considered 1/3 a person. Consequently, the repressive totalitarian American brand of slavery prohibits reading, writing, and liberty to access the power of language. This particular ‘slave code’ set the stage for an intergenerational literary backlash spearheaded by an infamous, enslaved Christian preacher.

“The prototype of the twentieth century revolutionaries, Nat Turner” used his literacy and the conceptual map of Judeo-Christianity to engage in violent protest of hell on Earth.⁴ “Consumed by the images and the visions of the Old and New Testament, Nat Turner turned the Book against the people who had given it to him.”⁵ The cultural trauma amassed through this systemic oppression resulted in subsequent generations of individuals w(riting) and speaking not only about the erroneous ways of the antebellum period, but the profane modern and contemporary world as well. Artists continue to enact their liberty in the world of letters, signs, and concepts to communicate their subjectivity and lambaste the destructive, fallacious logic of race and

¹ Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture Vol. 1* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004).

² The Atlantic Ocean, known as the Middle Passage, brought at least 12 million people of African descent to the United States and the Caribbean, which undoubtedly contributed to not only the economic development of the region, but the cultural and demographic as well. From an Afrocentric worldview, it is the key space separating a dispossessed people from an ancestral homeland akin to the River Jordan in Hebrew culture.

³ I am intellectually indebted to Daniel Fawcett, a colleague who advanced my understanding of messianism, particularly as it relates to Orthodox Judaism.

⁴ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Pioneers in Protest* (Johnson Publishing Company Inc., Chicago, 1968), 84.

⁵ Ibid, 89.

other institutions that hinder the social world from universal peace.

The Messianic asks how do past and contemporary cultural producers create, preserve, and contest knowledge in the realm of black popular music and literary field through a messianic posture. By highlighting the connection between contemporary artists performing discursive messianic speech/acts that oppose threats to black liberation through and earlier actors in the black intellectual tradition this project shows an intergenerational messianic zeal, to signify a political philosophy rooted in an idea of racial salvation. Music is an important feature throughout modern American history. It is a primary medium for people showing they are of the same culture. Furthermore, these critical performances imply a desire or expectation of black artists to serve dual roles as leaders toward enlightenment and leisure; to simultaneously entertain and be agents for social justice. This duality is a pre-colonial Africana cultural motif prominent in the history of black cultural producer pre-colonial.⁶

In *Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass remarks upon the sound culture in terms such as “haunting” and described the way improvised intonations were powerful.⁷ In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois described the sounds of the folk culture as “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.”⁸

To Du Bois the “Sorrow Songs” were perspectives that provided a reflexive engagement with nationality.⁹ Although they both described the musical folkways of Blacks in equally reverent terms, Du Bois took it a step beyond Douglass in his analysis. “And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas,” Du Bois said. In the same passage, he went on to say black folk music “has been neglected...and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro People.”¹⁰ What these passages reveal is that the phonic substance produced is an integral aspect to Black culture.

Albeit more vulgar,¹¹ rappers bear semblance to the work of Du Bois and other radical thinkers of the 20th century. Public philosopher Cornel West urges the forging of

⁶ Barber, Karen. “Popular Arts in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 30, no. 3 (1987), 3-12.

⁷ Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Project Gutenberg, 50-54. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23>.

⁸ Du Bois, W. E. B. *Souls of Black Folk*, (Bensenville: Lushena, 2000), 179.

⁹ Benedict Anderson attributes the birth of the ‘imagined community’ to “the novel and the newspaper,” but the African diaspora relies as much on oral traditions for imagined communities.

¹⁰ Du Bois, W. E. B. *Souls of Black Folk*, 178.

¹¹ *Folk* is rooted in the German *volk*, which means people. Vulgar, comes from *vulgus* which also connotes the common people and shared historical identity of a group.

an imagined gap between the impressive oeuvre of W.E.B. Du Bois with contemporary black radicalism and public intellectualism, including material forged in the annals of Hip Hop.

In *Black Prophetic Fire* he states:

One of the things that I have been able to really both revel in and benefit from...is trying to unite this radical intellectual legacy of Du Bois that hits the issue of empire and white supremacy with the popular cultural expressions of genius and talent-be it music, be it dance, be it among the younger generation or older generation-so that you actually have a kind of an interplay between, on the one hand, Du Bois's radicality and militancy when it comes to politics and economics, empire and race, and, on the other hand, the antiphonal forms of call and response, the syncopation, the rhythm, the rhyme, the tempo, the tone that you get in the best of Black cultural forms that are requisite for sustaining Black dignity and sanity, sustaining Black people as a whole.¹²

West's suggestion to unite a "radical intellectual legacy" with "popular cultural expressions" reflects his belief that there is a common thread between a past and the future radical tradition. Contemporary Black musical performances continue a Black radical aesthetic.¹³ Like Hip Hop artists, Du Bois' sentiment links to "a self-styled spirituality that was not wedded to cognitive commitments to God talk."¹⁴ The purpose of this study is to establish an understanding and connection between the sublime nature of the late 20th century cultural phenomenon known as Hip Hop to previous traditions. Albums and other material released within twenty years of 2pac Shakur's first posthumous release, *The Don Killuminati* (1996) including *Yeezus* (2013), *Black Messiah*, and *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015) are analyzed and show how artists scribe sentiments in order to be paid, but there is also a political implication to their work.

The Messianic

In 1919, FBI monolith J. Edgar Hoover was hired to disrupt domestic threats to America. That same year, literary giant and social activist Du Bois helped organize the first Pan-African conference to display solidarity in the face of rampant racism. Nine years later Du Bois published *Dark Princess: A Romance* a fictional novel that imagined the birth of a Black Messiah. Later in the 20th century while Du Bois continue to publish meditations on race and empire, Hoover continued to surveil outspoken black leaders and liberation movements, especially militant organizations throughout the 1960s. In a memorandum dated March 4, 1968, "To prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify, and electrify, the militant Black Nationalist movement," is listed as a primary goal of

¹² Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Fire* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2014), 50.

¹³ The phrase 'black radical aesthetic' borrows from Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

¹⁴ West, *Black Prophetic Fire*, 59.

the FBI's counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO).¹⁵ Hoover's fear that the expressions of Black Nationalist organizations could lead to revolutionary change correlates with the messianic idealism of Judaic thought. Under the guise of law and order, his campaign links sacredness with whiteness, yet receives resistance by vanguards who profane this ideology.

Efforts to thwart social movements were largely successful, however, decades later a new social phenomenon known as Hip Hop inherited the surveillance of prior movements. Nevertheless, Hip Hop also inherited the messianic zeal of prior movements. 2pac Shakur and others have used the messianic myth in order to describe conditions of blackness. Through popular music the complex life-worlds of black subjects continues to communicate in linguistic and non-linguistic ways.

Before Shakur released his debut album, *2pacalypse Now*, his lineage and activism rooted him in political discourse. However, the phrase '*2pacalypse*' grounds his work in a quasi-religious framework because of the play with the word apocalypse. This title ties the content to a concept of messianic time. His artistic persona and material heavily base on his personal worldview. One can hear his focus on police brutality, poverty, and the desperation that grows into criminal activity throughout his first project and subsequent work. 2pac assumes the role of a messiah, tasked with delivering a message to the masses. Throughout his career, he consciously straddled the sacred and the profane, underground and mainstream, which resulted in his signature, brand of ghetto gospel. In the course of his short impactful career, he used his platform to lambaste oppression facilitated by the establishment in a way, deemed messianic.

The concept of 'the sacred and the profane' as sociology notes originated in the early 20th century through the interventions of Durkheim.¹⁶ In her translation of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Karen Fields describes Durkheim's meditations on 'the soul' as a way to theorize about 'the real.'¹⁷ The sacred, whether embedded within religious discourses or not, concerns those ideas which are understood to be set apart from the rest of social life and which exert a profound moral claim over people's lives.¹⁸

¹⁵ U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "FBI Cointelpro-Black Extremism," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Accessed July 20, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/FBI-Cointelpro-Black>.

¹⁶ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), xvii.

¹⁷ Karen Fields illustrates in *Racecraft* how Du Bois and Durkheim were contemporaries whom may have never met, but scholarship and activist outlook paralleled one another in their studies of life-worlds. Du Bois and Durkheim lived through similar circumstances regarding the 'Negro problem' in America and the 'Jewish question' in France. Although both men were largely secular social scientists, both knew the cultural weight religious sensibilities played in their respective environments.

¹⁸ Christopher Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

The sacred and the profane concept is applicable to daily life and not just people in hunter-gatherer societies. Durkheim's theory highlights the various signs, symbols, traditions we consider sacred.

The acronymic socio-political title of his second title, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z* differs from the religious inspired first album title, but continues his description of the struggles of disenfranchised people and communities. Shakur's interplay with the term 'nigga,' was a brilliant strategy to empower people through a commonly used term. His third studio album title *Me Against The World* indirectly ties to the apocalyptic debut title whereas his final album, *The Don Killuminati: The Seven Day Theory* is packed with symbolism, from the album cover to lyrics throughout the album.

Shakur performed his last album under the alias Makaveli, operating under the pseudonym based on the founder of political science Machiavelli. At the outset of album, he criticized his contemporaries Mobb Deep, Jay-Z, and Notorious B.I.G. and posited the question, "Which side are you on?" The proverbial line drawn at the beginning denotes topics of real/fake, good/evil, normal/taboo explored throughout the album.

On this album, Shakur interpolated the Catholic "Hail Mary" prayer, and created a self-critique of the consequences of his fame. In the song "Blasphemy," he is heard signifyin(g) upon the symbolic value of the pope, questioning his cultural relevance in comparison to Malcolm X to the dispossessed repressed black masses. An overlooked quotable from the aforementioned song: "People in Jerusalem waiting for signs. God's coming *she's* just taking her time," suggests a female Godly presence and eschatological Judeo-Christian apocalyptic thought.¹⁹ Although she analyzes different textual themes in "Blasphemy," Ebony

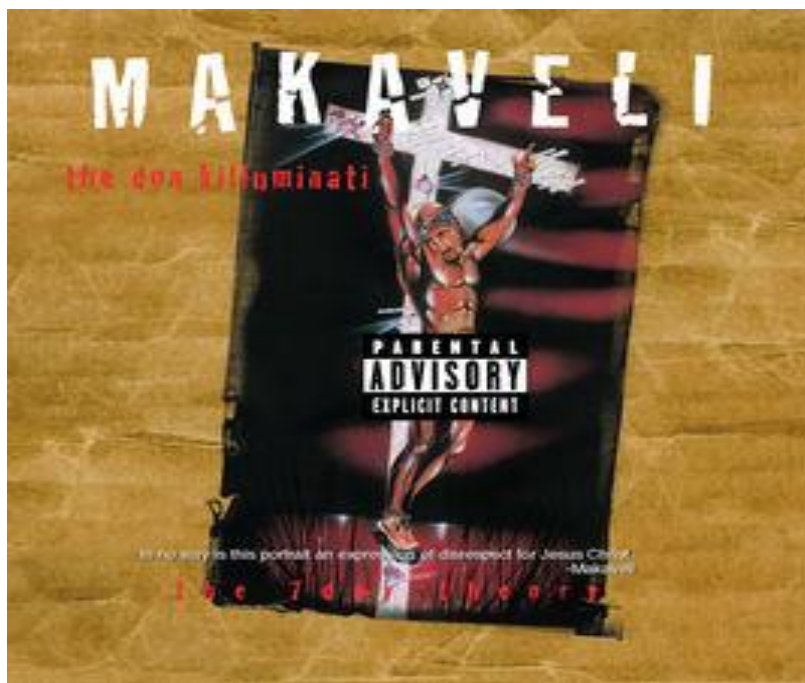


Fig. 1. The album cover to Shakur's first posthumous release. He is depicted as the biblical savior Jesus Christ. A statement from Tupac in white text reads, "In no way is this portrait an expression of disrespect for Jesus Christ."

¹⁹ Makaveli, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, Death Row/Interscope, 1996, CD.

Utley does not mention the subtly powerful lyric.²⁰ The poetic melancholy track “White Man’z World” is a change from the virulent tone of other tracks and reflects upon his experience with the prison-industrial complex and racial strife in general.

Like his songs “Keep Ya Head Up” and “Words 2 My First Born,” that deal with topics such as pro-choice reproductive rights for women and domestic violence, “Blasphemy” continues Shakur’s valuation of women through the invocation of a female Godhead. In spite of his criminal charge against a woman in 1994, Shakur’s messianic idealism aligns with historical figures like Douglass and Du Bois, whom were both interested in the womanist politics. These lyrics appear as evidence of Shakur’s critical concern with a more ethical body politics through taboo lyrics.²¹

Cultural theorists have critically analyzed *Dark Princess*,²² but fail to comment on the significance of the ‘Negro spiritual’ sang by Du Bois’ protagonist, Matthew Towns at the pivotal moment in the novel when the international guild of non-whites doubted ‘negroes’ adeptness towards civility in the modern world.²³ Townes evoked great emotion in his improvised performance of a Negro spiritual and through him; African Americans are trusted as coconspirators to disrupting white supremacy. *Dark Princess* shows the immovability of Du Bois’ versatility and his contribution to socially conscious popular culture.²⁴

The aggression and anger channels through Shakur’s messianic subjectivity. Miles White describes how “hardcore” rap performance has renegotiated, reconstructed and redefined notions of masculinity within the realm of popular culture.²⁵ White

²⁰ Ebony Utley, *Rap and Religion: Understanding The Gangsta’s God* (New York: Praeger, 2012), 100-101.

²¹ During a backstage interview at the House of Blues with the author, October 10, 2014 in Cleveland, OH Herbert “Ab-Soul” Stevens, describes rap and Hip Hop as “an intellectual movement.” He is a label mate of Kendrick Lamar. He proclaims on ‘Portishead in the Morning,’ “If I am not the Messiah, I’m a Mess,” further exemplifying Hip-Hop’s signification through rap language. Interestingly, “The Law” from his album *Do What Thou Wilt* uses 2pac’s lyric “God’s coming she’s just taking her time” as part of the chorus. The album’s title and much of the subject matter is derived from occultist Aleister Crowley and his religion Thelema, a divergence from his *These Days* messianic album cover, however, within the album contains the term ‘messiah,’ uttered on the song “Portishead In The Morning.”

²² “With its focus upon a roving intellectual protagonist who symbolizes not only the Negroes of the United States, but the tribeless,” Moses, Wilson J., *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

²³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 140.

²⁴ Work such as Sam Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* directly deals with subverting the status quo through guerilla warfare with the help of reformed gang members as conspirators, which echoes the plot of *Dark Princess*.

²⁵ Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 26.

claims that “violent narratives and dress...are all subversive” and “hardcore hip-hop practices give new aesthetic expression to black urban rage by engaging an array of oppositional strategies, including the aggressive performance of the body, the dense layering of discordant sonic textures, incendiary and obscene language.” White suggests one must acknowledge the transgressive nature of hardcore rap and should do so from a critical standpoint inasmuch to the critique of its hegemonic, degenerative mass proliferated subjectivities.²⁶

When hardcore tropes, such as the brute, blends with other signs and symbols including religion, which “often compels us to redefine our categories and redraw boundaries (between good and evil, religious and secular, sacred and profane)”²⁷ transgressive subjectivities expressed through pop-cultural that addresses “tangible social evils” contributes “to the construction of a *communitas* of the oppressed.”²⁸ The use of religious content to indict corruption has embedded within Black diasporic discourses for centuries. German theorist Walter Benjamin’s secular philosophy of Judaic end-of-history as emblematic of the modern experience is a thought provoking theory for analyzing intergenerational trauma. In his *Theses on the Concept of History*, Benjamin’s articulation of a sense of salvation based on interaction with the past creates a framework to analyze Hip Hop considering the endless manipulation of the past, to affect the here and now, and future through the practice of sampling. ‘The messianic without messianism’ is what Benjamin envisaged. How does his radical theology of Orthodox Judaism fit with the Hip Hop nation? His theories support practices like sampling that take the material wreckage of History for purpose of montage. Benjamin’s promulgation that every generation has been “endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” correlates with groups that have resisted the encroachment of empire.²⁹

Artists continue to comment on anti-blackness, gender, and other topics through radical textuality. Funk maestro, R&B extraordinaire Michael “D’Angelo” Archer is unabashed about his Hip Hop beginnings. His debut, *Brown Sugar*, was a stellar showcase of his originality within a familiar sonic palate. After his breakout debut, his next two albums touched on aspects of spirituality. *Voodoo*, with its Africanist

²⁶ In “Savior of the Race: The Messianic Burden of Black Masculinity,” Ronald Neal references how influential Hip Hop artists whose subjectivity differs from the “messianic masculinity” of Martin Luther King Jr., Barack Obama, and others, are “rendered abnormal or pathological for not living out these virtues.”

²⁷ Joseph Winters, “Unstrange Bedfellows,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 6 (2001): 261.

²⁸ Partridge, *The Lyre Of Orpheus*, 77.

²⁹ “The emergent agency is so often pacified, and folks suffer generation after generation with unjust treatment, unattended to, and then layers of suffering begin to mount, just like in the ninth thesis of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” that history is a catastrophe, the piling of wreckage, generation after generation, all of those precious lives lost, wasted potential, witnessed generation after generation,” *Black Prophetic Fire*, 45.

syncopation, album and song titles, *Black Messiah*, with its spirit of protest and Judeo-Christian conceptualization in its album title, song titles, and lyricism.³⁰ *Voodoo* marks the beginning of D'Angelo's clear interest in spiritual and religious content and *Black Messiah* continues the unfolding of his meditation on spiritual and religious content.

Voodoo, his second offering was an introduction to his worldview beyond the auspices of love balladry, differed immensely from its predecessor both in terms of content and sonically. The polished, radio ready material of the former was replaced by funky, idiosyncratic rhythms, dense lyrical content and noises that sound as if they were recording a séance. The depth of the lyrical content, and instrumentation was a relic of the thick, multi-instrumentation laden grooves of Parliament-Funkadelic. Songs like "Right & Left" featuring Method Man, Redman, and the "Devil's Pie (Remix) single featuring Fat Joe and Raekwon aligns D'Angelo with four East Coast rappers equally known for representing marginalized communities. The latter by far the most critical song on the album is a prime example of why the "neo" has prefaced soul. Other songs can be described as romantic, some improvisatory and obscure. However, "Devils Pie" is focused and dialectical and his critique of the greedy, materialistic banality of the modern/contemporary world echoes the central concerns of Marxism.

Black Messiah continues the religious and spiritual musings of D'Angelo but contains explicit traces of political motivation. "Many will think it's about religion. Some will jump to the conclusion that I'm calling myself a Black Messiah. For me the title is about all of us. It's about the world. It's about an idea we can all aspire to. We should all aspire to be a Black Messiah." He goes on to say "It's about people rising up in Ferguson and in Egypt and in Occupy Wall Street and in every place where a community has had enough and decides to make change happen. It's not about praising one charismatic leader but celebrating thousands of them...*Black Messiah* is not one man. It's a feeling that, collectively, we are that entire leader."³¹

In a conversation with Hip Hop journalist Nelson George, D'Angelo spoke of the spirit of Jimi Hendrix inspiring him during the recording of *Voodoo* in Hendrix's Electric Ladyland studio. After George asked him about the importance of the church for harboring the most talented musicians, which he confirmed as fact, he described the improvisatory tradition unique to a black church ethos.

"They used to say this when I was going to Church... 'don't go up there for no form or fashion.' Ya know? So...I guess what that means is: 'Listen! We're up here singing for the Lord so don't be up here trying to be cute. 'Cause we don't care about all that. We just want to feel what the spirit is moving through you.' And it's the best

³⁰ See Loren Kajikawa's "D'Angelo's Voodoo Technology: African Cultural Memory and the Ritual of Popular Music Consumption," for an interesting discussion.

³¹ D'Angelo, *Black Messiah*. RCA 88875-05655-2, 2014, CD.

place to learn that. Ya know? So you learn to shut yourself down and let whatever's comin', come through you.³²

D'Angelo's description of a 'stream of consciousness' technique employed in churches provides insight to the improvisatory nature of black music culture. In *Negro Folk Music* Ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander's description of how "the ecstatic seizure, getting of the 'spirit [is] fundamental in African religious experience, [and] is a commonplace characteristic of religious worship...throughout Negro areas of the Western Hemisphere," could operate as theoretical underpinning for what D'Angelo said to Nelson George and attendees of the lecture.³³

His song "Prayer" written solely by D'Angelo is a funky interpretation of the Lord's Prayer wherein the artists improvises within the classic rendition and sings of confusion in his environment, a desire for peace and redemption.³⁴ In "1000 Deaths," a song title and lyrics directly correlate with the introductory statement on 2pac's "If I Die 2Nite,"³⁵ D'Angelo claims, "Yahweh, Yahushua/He don't want no coward soldier." A sample of former Nation of Islam vitriolic spokesperson Khalid Abdul Muhammad proclaiming the phenotype of a biblical savior as black, followed by Chairman Fred Hampton's condemnation of "megalomaniac war mongers," is further evidence of the conflation of spiritual and political topics within pop music texts. There is also "Till It's Done (TuTu)," a song seemingly inspired by the fight against apartheid by South African priest Desmond

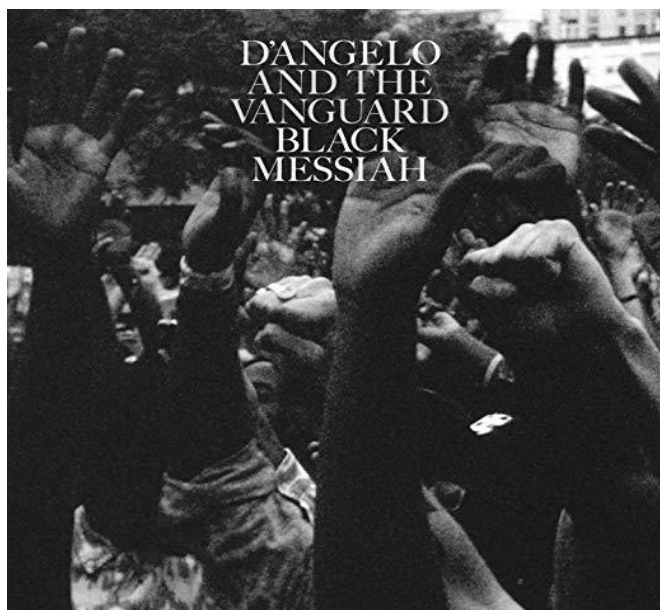


Fig. 2 The album cover shows a crowd with raised, clenched fists and raised open hands assumedly in reverence to solidarity. The dark, black based palette of the cover signifies 'blackness' as part and parcel to the spirit of the project.

³² Red Bull Music Academy, "D'Angelo (2014 RBMA Lecture)," *YouTube*, May 23, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WD1oaBCmZWA&t=744s>.

³³ Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 8.

³⁴ "See, black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus-invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation. This surplus lyricism...is what a lot of people are after when they invoke the art and culture-the radical," *In The Break*, 26.

³⁵ At the beginning of this song a voice utters, "A coward dies a thousand times, but a soldier only dies just once." Tupac Shakur, *Me against the World*, Interscope, 1994, CD.

Tutu, coupled with existential lyrics about the environment (carbon pollution, acid rain) reminiscent of Marvin Gaye's concerns in "What's Going On." This song places his protest beyond race and ethnicity by remarking on the humans' oft neglectful, abusive relationship to the Earth.

In comparison to his previous albums, *Black Messiah* did not gain as much commercial success whereas *Brown Sugar* and *Voodoo* are certified platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).³⁶ Yet, like Du Bois his venture into the realm of Afro-futurist fantasy realism was not as commercially viable as other contemporary art(iculations).

An artist who epitomizes success with racial, political content is Compton native and Pulitzer Prize for music recipient Kendrick Lamar Duckworth.³⁷ Similar to D'Angelo (*Voodoo*), Lamar followed up a critically acclaimed album (*Good Kid M.A.A.D. City*) with an album bolstered by live instrumentation and increased lyrical depth related to political and spiritual convictions. Before Lamar and his cousin Carl Duckworth discussed the idea of Hebrew culture and its relation to Black, Brown, and other non-White people throughout *DAMN*, his third album *To Pimp A Butterfly* has a subtext of a personal and

group liberation struggle. The cover art to his second certified platinum album depicts countless Black men and children in front of the Supreme Court adjacent to a seemingly maimed judge bringing to mind insurrectionary activities like that of infamous preacher

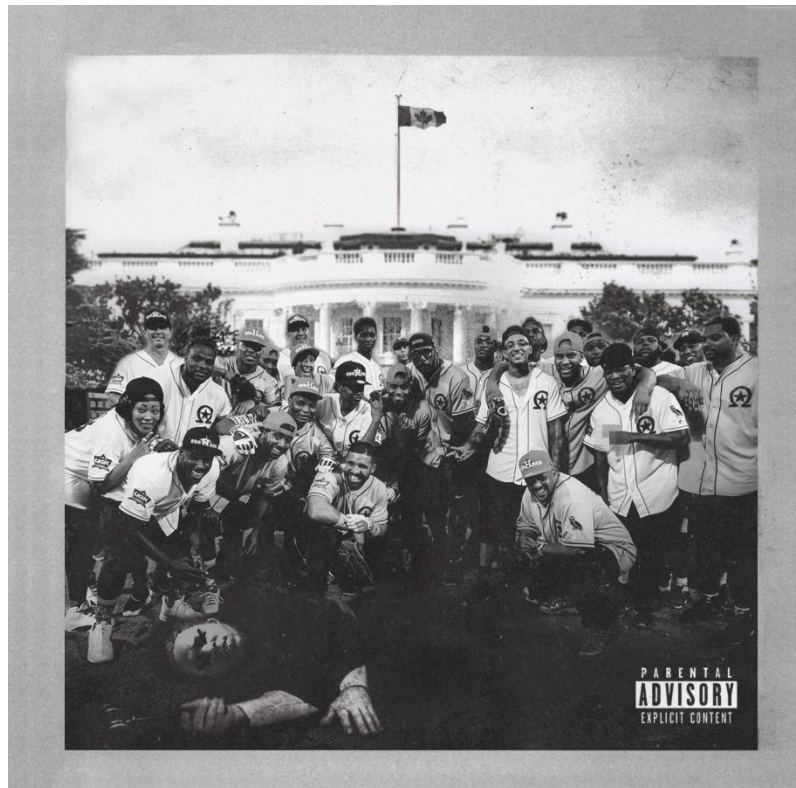


Fig. 3 Album cover for Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Lamar's position is in the center of the group, holding a child.

³⁶ "D'Angelo's Black Messiah Is #1 In Our Hearts, But Not On The Charts--What Gives?," Accessed November 10, 2017, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/613-dangelos-black-messiah-is-1-in-our-hearts-but-not-on-the-charts-what-gives/>.

³⁷ Associated Press, "Kendrick Lamar Breaks New Ground by Winning Pulitzer Prize," *The Telegraph*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/news/kendrick-lamar-breaks-new-ground-winning-pulitzer-prize/>

prophet Nat Turner or the *Appeal* of David Walker. The alto and tenor saxophone cut and shrieks through the traditional textures of a rap album.³⁸ On “How Much A Dollar Cost,” Lamar claims to be the Messiah, and his ruminations on Judaic concepts continue on “Yah,” when Lamar laments, “I’m an Israelite don’t call me Black no mo’(re)/Black is only a color it ain’t facts no mo’(re).”³⁹ The closing track on the album, “Mortal Man” contains an interview with Tupac Shakur from 1994. The conversation is presented as a conversation between Shakur and Lamar, the latter interviewing the former. Lamar’s tone is appreciative; he views Shakur a fellow, conflicted interlocutor tasked with addressing the racial, economic struggle that blocks the world from ‘messianic time.’ Shakur speaks of an inevitable bloody race war caused by poverty and racism. Lamar proclaims his belief that musical vibrations are the last hope for cultural salvation, Shakur shocks the former with a concept akin to D’Angelo’s statement about the spirits moving through the artist, when he says, “We ain’t even really rappin’, We just letting our dead homies tell stories for us.”

Kanye West has been a polarizing fixture in popular culture for nearly 15 years. Known for crashing award ceremonies⁴⁰ and off the cuff statements about presidential negligence and 400 plus years of slavery sounding like a choice,⁴¹ his output is beyond the parameters of musical art. For many, West’s criticism of then President George W. Bush’s response to Hurricane Katrina reflected his spirit of activism, but his latest comment regarding enslavement has placed him in a different light of scrutiny. In spite of this controversy, West, a self-proclaimed Christian, has represented messianic signs throughout his career.

Although many know he was merely a vessel for “Jesus Walks,” his performance of the song establishes him as an important modicum of the message.⁴² This song was an early example of West using messianic signs to engage sociological topics such as race, class, and gender. The song and its accompanying video includes choir arrangements salient in many Black American churches. Through his musical art and other speaking engagements, including Twitter, West portrays himself as a

³⁸ “It moves by way of the (phono-photo-porno-)graphic disruption the shriek carries out. This movement cuts...horn-voice-horn over percussion, a protest, an objection...,” *In The Break*, 14.

³⁹ Kendrick Lamar, *Damn*. Aftermath/Interscope/TDE, 2017, digital album.

⁴⁰ Paul Cantor, “Kanye West Apologizes to Taylor Swift for 2009 VMA Interruption,” MTV News, accessed July 20, 2018, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1647228/kanye-west-apologizes-to-taylor-swift-for-2009-vma-interruption/>.

⁴¹ He later commented that this comment was an example of “free thought” and claimed he was being “attacked” for it. Contextually, here is his response. Harmeet Kaur “Kanye West Just Said 400 Years of Slavery Was a Choice,” Accessed May 10, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/01/entertainment/kanye-west-slavery-choice-trnd/index.html>.

⁴² Jason Newoman, “How Rhymefest Avoided a Kanye Beatdown and Helped Craft ‘Jesus Walks,’” *Rolling Stone*, Accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/premieres/how-rhymefest-avoided-a-kanye-beatdown-and-helped-craft-jesus-walks-20150601>.

sacrificial figure for popular culture akin to 2pac, circa the Makaveli, *The Don Killuminati* period.

No matter where his journey through the world of art and fashion takes him, his roots are deeply in rap and Hip Hop culture. Arguably, one can find the most important part of his artistic voice in the records he repurposes to make montage style production for his own catalogue. His sample based crate-digging production amounts to a textuality. "New God Flow" featuring Pusha T samples a recording of a preacher of The Delta.⁴³ The sample connects with the folkways agrarian roots of the Deep South: the religion, oral tradition, and musical culture. West uses the sample of a 'reverend' for its sacred texture, for his secular purposes. Throughout West's verse, he raps from the point of view of a savior, drawing parallels between biblical text and violence haunting Chicago.

"Sanctified"⁴⁴ a song on artist Rick Ross' *Mastermind* album, co-produced by West whom is also a featured artist alongside soul singer Betty Wright and Big Sean.⁴⁵ Wright's first tenor to falsetto introductory soliloquy and chorus throughout the song about angels, being born again, spirits, and sanctification is juxtaposed with a bridge about paper chasin' and fornication, which sets the stage for a playful intercourse with the sacred and the profane.

Explicit, politically charged and at times absurd lyrical radicalism drives the certified platinum album *Yeezus*. Many regard this as the most atypical creation in his oeuvre. Throughout, 'over the top' lyrics operate as comic voice to balance out the scathing aggression on songs like "Black Skinhead" and "New Slaves." There is an intent focus, albeit vulgar, on leadership, which can be, heard "New Slaves;"⁴⁶ this leadership is part and parcel of West's overarching belief that Hip Hoppers are the new rock and roll, avant-garde rock stars.⁴⁷ The Caribbean flavor scattered throughout

⁴³ On his album *Cruel Summer*, he uses a folk recording in different songs, invoking the vernacular event as affective space before constructing his own work. His usage of samples, particularly folk recording "A Sermon Fragment" by Reverend G.I. Townsel within "New God Flow." Kanye West, *Cruel Summer*. GOOD/Def Jam, 2012, CD.

⁴⁴ Sanctify-to make holy; set apart as sacred; consecrate.

⁴⁵ Rick Ross, *Mastermind*. Def Jam, 2014, CD.

⁴⁶ The politically charged song ends with distorted vocals of Frank Ocean singing over a Hungarian artist Omega's song "The Girl with the Pearls in Her Hair." He is the defendant in a suit for his use of this sample. Whether or not he uses this sampled song for its title is unknown. However, 'pearls' is a lude, sexual concept that can connect to his obscene leader/follower dichotomy in the lyrics of "New Slaves." Because of his own sexual ambiguity, Ocean's humming over the music complicates a simple classification of the music as hyper-masculine further suggesting the conscientious absurdity of West.

⁴⁷ In his interview with Zane Lowe, West says the project highlights his resistance to "speaking with today's textures." In this interview, he decries that rap is the new rock and roll, and he is the biggest star of them all. BBC Radio 1, "Kanye West. Zane Lowe. Part 1," YouTube, September 23, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2T0fMkZoMo>.

Yeezus and Lamar's, "Blacker the Berry" signifies "a form of Zionism [that] evolved within Jamaica...explicit in Rastafarianism and... frequently articulated in Reggae."⁴⁸ Reggae and dancehall artists regularly refer to Babylon. Between these artists and Hip Hop artists, there is a common heritage of Africa as ancestral homeland and myriad forms of resistance to colonial subjugation. Hip Hop uses the sound and aggressive content of reggae/dancehall as cultural capital for its own purpose.

Womanist Africana Studies scholar Salamishah Tillet notes, "How black radicalism is embodied, gendered, and memorialized within mainstream Hip Hop culture."⁴⁹ West has sampled the work of Nina Simone throughout his career. Simone defied genre through experimentation and contested oppressive racial structures. Tillet claims West samples Simone the most and credits Hip Hop for making her catalogue more accessible to wider audiences.⁵⁰ She notes controversy regarding his usage of Simone especially the song, "Blood on the Leaves." Tillet identifies Simone as key to what she terms sonic black radicalism. The messianic lens allows for the paradoxical framework. With the instrumental node of Hip Hop's unified system, the sample is a seed of simultaneity. The past, present, and an imagined future materialize on sonic palettes. Tillet describes Simone "as a figure who aurally ties the Hip Hop generation to the black freedom struggle."⁵¹ Simone is a signifier within a signified (Messiah) in the case of West's *Yeezus*. She is an authentic sound of dissent from an era of revolutionary discourse, used for the Avant-pop messianism of a pop culture icon.

Conclusion

Decades ago, traditional media outlets, television broadcast news and print publications emboldened parents like my own to prohibit the incursion of a profane/sacred genre known as Rap and Hip Hop. Now Hip Hop is at the forefront for its critical acumen and is arguably the most popular folk music of today. During a concert and panel discussion organized by Georgetown University and Pontifical Council for Culture at the Vatican and the Archdiocese of Washington, Talib Kweli (Greene) referred to his songs as "prayers," which is in stark contrast to the unpolitical, Pentecostal hegemony I experienced as a child. In fact, Kweli's description particularly aligns with the work of Black Nationalist pastor Albert Cleage who regards militant

⁴⁸ Partridge *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 221; Boomshots "Kanye West's Yeezus Full Up of Dancehall Samples," Accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.boomshots.com/index.php/2013/06/kanye-wests-yeezus-full-up-of-dancehall-samples/>, Biko Kennedy, "Dancehall the hidden inspiration of Kanye West's 'Yeezus'," http://jamaicansmusic.com/news/Music/Dancehall_The_Hidden_Inspiration_Of_Kanye_West_s_Yeezus

⁴⁹ Salamishah Tillet, "Strange Sampling: Nina Simone and Her Hip-Hop Children," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2014): 121-122.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 119.

⁵¹ Ibid. 120.

leaders as messiahs in his text *Black Messiah*.⁵²

The ‘messianic’ concept is useful to understand the conviction, direction, and subsequent work of some of the most prolific cultural producers, including emcees, authors, and athletes. Former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s order to prevent the rise of a black messiah adds a layer to the conversation but contemporary artists’ usage of the concept fosters a critical conversation of race and empire. Hip Hop continues the culture of language and letters of the legacy of Frederick Douglass, Du Bois and others devoted to restoring subjectivity and humanity to people denied equity. There is considerable documentation regarding DuBois’ obsessive scientific journalism throughout his lifetime, but the conspiratorial, messianic fictional novel *Dark Princess* shows Du Bois as a progenitor of subversive fiction that engendered future artists of different genres to construct their own messianic subjectivities in the realm of popular culture.

For further reading on contemporary figures who signify messianic discourse, see Deidre Lyniece Wheaton’s “Seeking Salvation: Black Messianism, Racial Formation, And Christian Thought in Late Twentieth Century Cultural Texts” (diss., University of Michigan, 2008). Wheaton analyzes comics, photography, and fiction literature as sites where the tradition of Black Messianism maintains that their creative fashioning of black Messianism evokes the ideological and rhetorical power of previous black cultural producers. Wheaton framed her argument about “new millennium” black messiahs by focusing on *The Boondocks* by Aaron McGruder, the visual art of Renee Cox, and *The White Boy Shuffle* a novel by Paul Beatty. She argues that these cultural producers constructed imagined characters that radically analyze the institution of race to the extent that one can view the character as a leader of oppressed diaspora toward a world without racialized modes of thinking. The new millennium Black messiahs Wheaton describes are concerned with the American racial landscape which they see as a wild, Babylonian experience. Wheaton believes these cultural interventions “are the newest branches on a very old tree of black messianism—an element in African American culture with deep social, political, racial and religious roots.” Her dissertation is a continuation of literature concerning Black radicalism from the 19th century on.⁵³

There is no paucity of criticism on the spirit of negativity in Hip Hop. However,

⁵² In the documentary *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*, Kweli describes a moment when authorities apprehend and question him in an airport. He realizes the Stokely Carmichael speeches he was listening to in his headphones were flagged, which shows the militancy of Kwame Ture continues to cause trepidation for the (American) state apparatus. Kweli’s craft of political prayers is part of a larger discourse of artists who contest racism and inequity through cultural production.

⁵³ Also read, “Manufacturing a Messiah: How Nike and LeBron James Co-Constructed the Legend of King James” by Richard MocarSKI and Andrew Billings. The authors identify what they see as a calculative scheme employed by Nike and LeBron James, to represent the latter as a messiah figure in the commercial marketplace.

Hip Hop is also a genre/social movement ripe with narratives about survival from marginalized viewpoints. Moreover, the messianic verve throughout the black intellectual tradition shows how the complex issue of nationalism has been engaged in similar fashion by different generations of Black American cultural producers. It goes beyond utopian constructions of manhood promoted by liberal and conservative Protestant Christianity. If Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama represent messianic men, then artists like D'Angelo, 2pac Shakur, Kanye West, and others represent a more abstruse version of the (black) messianic idea.

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Kendrick Lamar's Collapsing of Hip Hop Realness and Christian Identity

Matthew Linder

Abstract

In Danielle S. Macon's "To Pimp a Caterpillar: Hip Hop as Vehicle to Spiritual Liberation through the Decolonization of European Ideology" about Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, she identifies Kendrick's three-step process of liberation for African-Americans through spirituality: exhibition, revelation, and community orientation. I seek to place her analysis of Kendrick's music within the context of Daniel White Hodge's exploration of the neo-sacred secular in Hip Hop, a theological concept containing three elements: a belief that God is in all things, viewing life as having good and bad elements, and a rejection of religionism as the only way to God. Firstly, I will explore how Kendrick takes on himself the tropes of Hip Hop and African-American Street life, not to promote their virtues but to subvert them. Secondly, framing Kendrick's presentation of an alternative identity built on his reframing of two Christian theological concepts: *imago dei* and identity as found in person and work of Jesus. Lastly, the process through which he bridges the gap between life in poor African-American urban spaces and Christianity to reconstruct Hip Hop realness in terms of sincerity and a common humanity, instead of the artificially-created litmus tests of Hip Hop authenticity. These three elements are then oriented in Kendrick's music as the spiritual processes through which he strives to liberate himself, Compton, and his African-American community.

Introduction

Spirituality in the music of the Compton-based rapper Kendrick Lamar is a means through which he liberates himself, Compton and his black community.¹ According to Danielle Macon in her exploration of the Afrocentrism in *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick accomplishes this through a three-step process: exhibition, revelation, and community orientation.² Exhibition entails putting “capitalism and obsession with materialism on display to show” detrimental effects to African-Americans.³ Revelation through the discovery of “his spirituality by acknowledging a supreme being” and finding significance in a God who is greater than capitalism and materialism.⁴ Lastly, community orientation involves restoration of Compton through an elevated consciousness and African traditional values.⁵ I aim with this article to further refine and expand the understanding of this liberating spiritual process in Kendrick’s music by utilizing the theological concept of the neo-secular sacred.

Daniel White Hodge first applied the neo-secular sacred, a theology of the profane, was to Hip Hop in *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration*. In that work, he states “the reality[ies] of life... all come together and still find theological connections with a God who can sit in those tensions—not the idealized abstraction of good intentions... but the day-to-day nitty-gritty of life in hostile contexts.”⁶ Hodge notes: “Inside this theological paradigm, there is the opportunity finally to be human and be authentic with yourself and your God.”⁷ I contend that Hodge’s use of authenticity in this context aligns with the sociological notion of sincerity. In sociology, sincerity and authenticity, while related, are distinct in how they function within culture. Authenticity often limits to constraints of a predetermined set of acceptable conditions, which define within a given cultural context how real the identity of a person is. It turns identity into an object that needs to follow certain discourses and scripts, which creates litmus tests for people and their identity within a group.⁸ Sincerity, on the other hand, is being honest, emotionally vulnerable and earnest on purpose.⁹ The concern of sincerity is to re-infuse searches for authenticity with humanity, seeing people not as objects but as subjects who have complex emotions, desires and thoughts. That sincere humanity and sincerity in

¹ Danielle S. Macon, “To Pimp a Caterpillar: Hip Hop as Vehicle to Spiritual Liberation through the Decolonization of European Ideology” (Master’s Thesis, Temple University, 2017), 35.

² Ibid, 35, 38, and 40.

³ Ibid, 35.

⁴ Ibid, 38.

⁵ Ibid, 40.

⁶ Daniel White Hodge, *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 196.

⁷ Ibid, 197.

⁸ John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15.

⁹ R. Jay. Magill, *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion That We All Have Something to Say (no Matter How Dull)* (New York: Norton, 2012), 206.

relation to God comes through in the neo-secular sacred in hip hop, according to Hodge, via three means: a panthesim manner (a belief that God is in all things), viewing life as having good and bad elements, and a rejection of religionism as the only way to God.¹⁰

Hodge states that the neo-secular sacred is an "embracing the two conflicting, at times opposing, forces within life that make us all 'tick'"¹¹ It begins to answer questions about "pain and suffering, but, at the very least, give some hope in something beyond 'this life.'" It also allows for certain contradictions that humans possess—to flourish while they "work out" the details with God."¹² It is in this spiritual tension of the holy and the profane that Kendrick in his music seeks to liberate himself and his community. Firstly, Kendrick's music subverts African-American street culture, by utilizing common Hip Hop thematic materials and musical choices, which are identifiable within the genre but often, move beyond it. Secondly, his music seeks reconstruction through both lyrical and musical content to endow a new identity upon his listeners that grounds in Kendrick's use of Christianity. Lastly, Kendrick's music collapses the distance between, Christianity and urban African-American street culture, by placing them in conversation with each other instead of as dialectical opposites, in order to bring peace, hope and liberation to Compton.

While this article explores close readings of Kendrick's music in regards to a personal faith in Christianity (and his public persona often invites such readings of his lyrical and musical content), it must be tempered by the understanding that his musical narratives serve in purpose to liberate black communities through the spiritual over autobiographical accuracy. For instance, fans and critics have speculated if Kendrick killed someone at 16 because he rapped on "m.A.A.d City," "If I told you I killed a n**** at 16, would you believe me? Or see me to be innocent Kendrick you seen in the street."¹³ In addition, conversations on the spiritual content of DAMN centers on the personal sincerity of his belief in Hebrew Israelite theology, generally considered outside of historic Christianity.¹⁴ As Macon points out,

¹⁰ Daniel White Hodge, *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel*, 198.

¹¹ Ibid., 198.

¹² Ibid., 197.

¹³ Lisa Robinson, "The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar," *Vanity Fair*, June 28, 2018, Accessed July 4, 2018. When asked if he shot someone at 16, Kendrick replies, "I'll put it this way: I've seen my own blood shed, and I've been the cause of other people shedding their blood as well. There was a split second when I felt what my homeboys were feeling—like I don't give a fuck anymore—and that's when I knew something else had to happen."

¹⁴ See Kestenbaum, Sam, "Kendrick Lamar Goes Hebrew Israelite On 'Damn'," *Fast Forward*, April 14, 2017, Accessed July 4, 2018 and Andre E. Key, "'Don't Call Me Black No More, I'm an Israelite': Kendrick Lamar, Black Hebrew Religion, and Black Suffering," *Religion Dispatches*, May 10, 2017, Accessed July 4, 2018. In addition see Matthew Linder, "Kendrick Lamar's Duel with Damnation," *Christianity Today*, April 26, 2017, Accessed July 4, 2018, where I argue that Kendrick's seeming embrace

"mimicking reality is not the sole purpose of art, at least not from an Afrocentric perspective."¹⁵ Natalie Graham's exploration of Kendrick's "King Kunta" particularizes this Afrocentric perspective on art to Kendrick where "in many cases, the telling of 'the true story' happens at a remove, via fragments or by use of fictive conceit."¹⁶ Yet, whether or not elements of Kendrick's music are autobiographical or not, Kendrick performs his unique presentation of Christianity as the liberating force for himself and oppressed blacks in Compton.

The New Realness

Mark Anthony Neal writes in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, post-soul is concerned with "a reconstitution of community," "a rigorous form of self and communal critique" and seeks to "undermine and deconstruct the most negative symbols and stereotypes of black life via the use and distribution of those very same symbols and stereotypes."¹⁷ Kendrick's music operates using the imagination of the post-soul aesthetic and points toward spirituality as a liberating force for himself and his community. As Macon argues "in order for African people to be liberated through Hip Hop and any other form of African art, a spiritual component coupled with an Afrocentric consciousness must be utilized at the core of its production."¹⁸ In Kendrick's music, he regularly collapses the space between ghetto/church, sacred/profane and Hip Hop realness/Christian identity, in service of subverting the narratives of each in order to reconstitute a new narrative, which seeks to liberate black bodies through a spiritually rich interior life. This occurs, as Kendrick notes, to effect positive change in the kids in Compton who are suicidal, as well as those who are in the penitentiary,¹⁹ by giving them a new conception of identity, a new realness. As Kendrick explained in a 2012 *Spin* interview, "The idea of me sparking change? It's got to come from within."²⁰

To understand Kendrick's place in the formation of this new realness, I offer a brief review of three Hip Hop artists that relate to Kendrick's music. They are the Hip Hop artists who have had the greatest impact and influence on Kendrick's approach and purpose in creating his music, DMX, Tupac and Ms. Lauryn Hill. DMX was the

of Black Hebrew Israelite theology functions not as a tacit acceptance of the theology but further heightens the main theme of *DAMN*, Kendrick's fears.

¹⁵ Macon, "To Pimp a Caterpillar," 1.

¹⁶ Natalie Graham, "What Slaves We Are: Narrative, Trauma, and Power in Kendrick Lamar's roots," *Transit* 122, (2017): 125.

¹⁷ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-soul Aesthetic*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 120.

¹⁸ Macon, "To Pimp a Caterpillar," 2.

¹⁹ Kendrick Lamar, Ebro Darden and Peter Rosenberg, "Kendrick Says Macklemore Went Too Far, Who 'i' Is for and the State of Hip Hop," *Hot 97*, November 3, 2014, Accessed October 18, 2015.

²⁰ Jessica Hopper, "Kendrick Lamar: Not Your Average Everyday Rap Savior," *Spin*, October 9, 2012, Accessed July 4, 2018.

one who inspired Kendrick to rap in the first place after hearing DMX's album, *It's Dark and Hell is Hot*. Comparisons between Tupac and Kendrick are common as both speak about street life and God, and enter the two worldviews in conversation with each other in interesting ways. Lastly, Lauryn Hill's vulnerability, prophetic voice and subversion of the real (as she does so eloquently and forcefully in her MTV Unplugged No 2.0 performance) echoes throughout Kendrick's music. On the track ("The Heart Pt. 3") posted on YouTube, the day before Kendrick's major label debut, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, was released, he referenced the influence of all three musicians on his music. Tupac looms large, "When the whole world sees you as Pac reincarnated." DMX is recognized as Kendrick's original inspiration, "Thank God for the album I idolized/ It's dark and plus hell is hot, that's the start of this crazy ride." Kendrick places the themes of *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* on par with Lauryn Hill's one studio solo album, "the newer Miseducation." Beyond their influence on Kendrick, Hill, Tupac and DMX began with their music to redefine authenticity in Hip Hop, moving the conversation into elements of the sincere, explored within the context of their presentation and understanding of Christian faith. The wide-reaching effect of this shift from tests of authenticity to a rehumanizing sincerity in Hip Hop, allowed rappers to reveal a greater sense of vulnerability in their music and through this shift DMX, Tupac and Lauryn Hill would influence rappers as diverse as Kanye West, Vince Staples, J. Cole, Childish Gambino and Drake.

However, unlike DMX and Tupac, though similar to Ms. Lauryn Hill, Kendrick "uses our [African-American] culture and identity as agency for liberation."²¹ Operating through different spheres of meaning attached to being real in Hip Hop, Kendrick takes a three-pronged approach in his music in working on the axis between life on the street and a life of Christian faith. As he recounts in "Ab-Soul's Outro" from his *Section.80* mixtape, "I'm not on the outside looking in, I'm not on the inside looking out/ I'm in the dead fucking center, looking around."²² Firstly, he takes on himself the tropes of Hip Hop and street life, not to promote their virtues but to subvert them.²³ Secondly, he presents an alternative identity where he presents his understanding of two Christian theological concepts: *imago dei* and identity as found in person and work of Jesus. Lastly, he synthesizes life in poor African-American urban spaces and his lyrical presentation of Christianity to reconstruct realness in terms of sincerity and a common humanity, instead of the artificially created litmus tests of Hip Hop authenticity. To that end, separating the space of life from the world of spirituality is what would cause, according Kendrick's music, one to construct a false sense of the real, whether that is in Hip Hop or in the lives of blacks in Compton and beyond.

²¹ Macon, "To Pimp a Caterpillar," 31.

²² Kendrick Lamar, "Ab-Soul's Outro," *Section.80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011).

²³ Alan Noble, "I'll Write Til I'm Right With God," *First Things*, August 31, 2015, Accessed October 18, 2015.

Subverting the Real in Hip Hop

Stereotypically, performing realness in the sphere of Hip Hop in the United States often includes the search for material wealth, sexual prowess with women, and knowledge of and participation in African-American street culture.²⁴ These performative clichés of realness were so firm and cemented to Hip Hop culture during the Golden era of Hip Hop in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that the Chris Rock-led film, *CB4*, imagined a Hip Hop industry where rappers could co-opt the identity of the gangsta in order to garner more success in the music business. As Greg Dimitriadis writes in *Performing Identity/Performing Culture*, “The gangsta rap narrative stuck a chord in American popular culture, most especially with solvent young white teens... The violent outlaw, living his life outside of dominant cultural constraints, solving his problems through brute power and domination, is a character type with deep roots in popular American lore.”²⁵ While the distance between actual experiences with gang violence and drugs during Golden-era Hip Hop in the United States were somewhat closer to reality, for many of the most popular radio rappers in the 2000s and 2010s, this type of realness was performative.

Kendrick, in his music, often subverts this type performative realness in Hip Hop. From the telling not showing-ness of “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said)” to the extreme braggadocio of “Backseat Freestyle,” Lamar uses the language of extravagant notions of being real and in subtle, and sometimes overt ways, informing listeners of the ridiculousness such pursuits of authenticity. In “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said),”²⁶ from his album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, after listing ways in which the categories of Hip Hop realness ring false for most African-American youth (hoes, money, drugs and alcohol), that for one to claim this identity in such extremes, makes one “sound like the Feds.”²⁷ The opposite effect of what was intended (the passing of an authenticity test) is what is communicated and comes off to Kendrick as a fake persona grafted on his “n****,” hiding their identity. In a *New Yorker* piece about the white Australian rapper, Iggy Azalea, and her performative identity, Andrew Marantz writes, she “apes clichés about realness without either expanding or subverting them. Realness, for her, is just another Hip Hop tic, like throwing one’s

²⁴ R.A.T. Judy, “On the Question of N**** Authenticity,” In *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, edited by Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 112.

²⁵ Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice*, (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 34.

²⁶ Interestingly, the inspiration for this song is Ice Cube’s “You Ain’t Gotta Lie Ta Kick It” which features Chris Rock performing a type of Hip Hop realness that is similar his portrayal of realness in *CB4*.

²⁷ Kendrick Lamar, “You Ain’t Gotta Lie (Momma Said),” *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

hands in the air or staying on one's grind."²⁸ Moreover, that is what Kendrick's music is reacting against in seeing these kids put on an identity that is not their own, they are reducing the complexities of their humanity to a handful of Hip Hop tropes regarding real blackness.

Kendrick in the bridge to the song tells those who have gone over the top with trying to prove their realness, "Been allergic to talkin', been aversion to bullshit/ Instead of dreamin' the auction, tell me just who your boss is/ N****s be fugazie, bitches be fugazie."²⁹ This is Kendrick's call to bring Hip Hop back to a more grounded reality instead of the fabricated authenticity that pervades many elements of the genre. However, more than that, Kendrick lyrically explores how the culture of Hip Hop has created insincere identities among African-American youth. Kendrick's invitation to kids living in ghettos across America is to see their humanity and not to think that their identity as an African-American needs to fit within the limited Hip Hop characterizations of realness. As Bettina Love writes on Kendrick's conceptualization of living within the confines of black racial identity, "the existential consciousness present in Lamar's lyrics is an inner resistance central to the wellness of our youth."³⁰ Presenting Hip Hop authenticity as an ideal (realness), which one can achieve through conformity to practices of the ideal (hoes, money, drugs and alcohol) and arguing that a performance of authenticity makes a difference in creating realness is what Kendrick is fighting against.³¹

Kendrick is even more explicit in "A.D.H.D.," from his *Section.80* mixtape, as he takes on the use of drugs within his community. An upward cascading synth with a continuously pulsating bass set a mellowed out mood characteristic of other Hip Hop songs about getting high. However, in the opening lyrics and hook of the song, while set amidst the soundscape reminiscent of songs about weed, he dismisses the major intoxicants of Kendrick's cultural context:

*8 doobies to the face
Fuck that
12 bottles in the case
N**** fuck that
2 pills and a halfway
n****, fuck that*³²

²⁸ Andrew Marantz, "Iggy Azalea and Realness in Hip-Hop," *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2014, Accessed October 18, 2015.

²⁹ Lamar, "You Ain't Gotta Lie (Momma Said)."

³⁰ Bettina L. Love, "Good Kids, Mad Cities: Kendrick Lamar and Finding Inner Resistance in Response to Ferguson USA" *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 16, No. 3: 2016, 322.

³¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 23.

³² Kendrick Lamar, "A.D.H.D.," *Section.80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011).

When Kendrick finally lands on the song's title, as a major point of arrival, the snare echoing through the silence mimics a gunshot. But this shot is not directed toward another human being but is pointed at the drug culture of the 1980s, which, according to Kendrick discussing "A.D.H.D" with Complex, "not only did it speak about myself but it spoke about a whole generation around the world that went through the influence."³³ And Kendrick knows that the only way in which his anti-drug message will be heard is within the context of a rap song, as he states in the second verse:

*My generation sippin cough syrup like its water
Never no pancakes in the kitchen
Man, no wonder our lives is caught up
In the daily superstition
That the word is bout to end
Who gives a fuck? We never do listen
Unless it comes with an 808, a melody and some hoes*³⁴

Then in two songs, "Momma" and "Backseat Freestyle," he shows how he too once bought into conceptualizations of Hip Hop authenticity. "Momma" presents all the ways in which Kendrick pursued realness and attempted to gain as much knowledge as possible about rap, his hometown Compton, gangs, violence, spirituality and the benefits of being a famous rapper. His drawn out monologue on his knowledge of these various authenticity tests are subverted when in the last line of the verse he raps, "until I realized I didn't know shit/ The day I came home."³⁵ The polyrhythmic snare and hemiola feel of the hook further enforces the tension between a complete knowledge of various definitions of realness or being sincere in relationships with those from his community. Even Kendrick, who has been trying to subvert Hip Hop narratives of realness through his music, knows the temptation of delving into an identity created by the music genre he works inside.

On the other hand, in "Backseat Freestyle" from good kid, m.A.A.d. city, Kendrick utilizes the presentation of himself, as an aggrandized version of black masculinity, to subvert "negative symbols and stereotypes of black life."³⁶ Punch, President of Kendrick's record label, Top Dawg Entertainment, described to Complex, "That song is real reckless, that's a young man's song."³⁷ That type of young recklessness presented in "Backseat Freestyle" interprets through William T. Houston's Black Masculinity in the Obama Era: Outliers of Society summary of

³³ David Drake, "Kendrick Lamar's Favorite TDE Songs," Complex, October 25, 2012, Accessed July 14, 2018.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kendrick Lamar, "Momma," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment: 2015).

³⁶ Neal, *Soul Babies*, 120.

³⁷ Insanul Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city'," *Complex*, October 23, 2012, Accessed July 14, 2018.

aggrandized black male identity, “I’m a real n****. I don’t give a fuck.”³⁸ The “I don’t give a fuck”³⁹ stance of “Backseat Freestyle” Kendrick views as a way to escape reality: “It’s about me and my homeboys really getting in the backseat and starting our day. Sometimes we’ll rap, it takes away from everything else.”⁴⁰ Kendrick presents the negative symbols of aggrandized black masculinity through hyperbolic extremes with a four-line hook, which incorporates money, power, respect, violence and sexual prowess:

*All my life I want money and power
Respect my mind or die from lead shower
I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower
So I can fuck the world for 72 hours*⁴¹

Furthermore, the production on this track is almost entirely percussive with a heavy emphasis on the clanging of bells, which one can interpret as a sonic representation of chains. Hit-Boy, who produced the track, speaks of Kendrick’s involvement in the musical choices of “Backstreet Freestyle,” “Kendrick [changed the beat I gave him by] looping this one part from the beginning that wasn’t that way when I first gave him the beat. So he’s hearing what he wanted to hear. He definitely had a hand in making it how he wanted it to sound.”⁴² While Kendrick’s lyrics promote hyper-masculinity,⁴³ the bare sonic space Kendrick and Hit-Boy created with clanging chains and lack of any musical tones, seems to present a narrative where Kendrick and his friends are enslaved, and not empowered, by violence, materialism and oversexualization. However, there is one lyrical moment where Kendrick flippantly nods to spirituality as an antidote to hypermasculinization: “And I pray you n**** is hating, shooters go after Judas/ Jesus Christ if I live life on my knees, ain’t no need to do this.”⁴⁴ A trajectory of inward reflection through the spiritual further developed throughout the rest of *good kid, m.A.A.d city* but also found in the rest of Kendrick’s body of work.

Reconstructing a Liberating Christian Identity

Continuing the dismantling of the real in Hip Hop, Kendrick in “u” from *To Pimp a Butterfly*, turns on himself (similar to “Momma”) and how he as a rapper, conforms to the game of being real. While he is deconstructing the role he has played in contributing to this narrative of authenticity in Hip Hop, Kendrick is also

³⁸ William T. Hoston, *Black Masculinity in the Obama Era: Outliers of Society*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 30.

³⁹ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, “The Making of Kendrick Lamar’s ‘good kid, m.A.A.d city’.”

⁴¹ Kendrick Lamar, “Backseat Freestyle,” *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

⁴² Ahmed, “The Making of Kendrick Lamar’s ‘good kid, m.A.A.d city’.”

⁴³ Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 129.

⁴⁴ Lamar, “Backseat Freestyle.”

constructing a new model of identity through his understanding and presentation of Christian spirituality. The song serves as a moment in Kendrick's career where he reflects on what he has achieved and if through his music he has brought any good, specifically to his hometown, Compton. In an oral history of *To Pimp a Butterfly* for Grammy, he explains that "u" reflects on his influence: "When you're onstage rapping and all these people are cheering for you, you actually feel like you're saving lives. But you aren't saving lives back home. It made me question if I am in the right place spreading my voice."⁴⁵ MixedByAli recounting the recording session for "u" states, "The mic was on and I could hear him walking back and forth and having these super angry vocals. Then he'd start recording with the lights off and it was super emotional."⁴⁶

That emotionality comes not only in his strained vocal delivery but also through lyrics, which self-reflect on Kendrick's ability to change anyone's hearts through his music, and feeling that even God would say to him, "you fuckin' failed."⁴⁷ Besides thinking he failed God, he raps that he is not a brother, disciple or friend to anyone in his community because he left Compton to pursue monetary gain. Now in his vulnerability he cries himself to sleep because he was not around when his old homies are shot or when his sister became pregnant. He admits to battling depression, contemplating suicide and in the second half of the song, while glasses of alcohol clink, he raps on the verge of an emotional breakdown. Kendrick in not shying away from emotional vulnerability in "u" goes against the grain of "the self-proclaimed 'n****', [where] vulnerability is not an option, and is an emotional state reserved for their 'feminine' counterparts."⁴⁸

By allowing himself to be emotionally vulnerable, Kendrick is able to reevaluate why he got into Hip Hop and if his music has had a lasting impact for the community that he grew up in. Kendrick's self-reflection on his attempts at liberating his community through Hip Hop, can also be seen in a 2018 interview with Vanity Fair:

I know a lot of people who could—I've seen it—like 'Fuck you, I've got money now, I'm outta here, I don't give a fuck about none of y'all.' But that was something I couldn't deal with. I had to sit back and analyze it and [figure out] other ways I could impact these people without physically trying to bring the whole hood inside a hotel.⁴⁹

In other words, if rapping has become more important than the people Kendrick loves and the black community he hopes to affect positive change in, then rap becomes

⁴⁵ Andreas Hale, "'To Pimp a Butterfly': Kendrick Lamar shares history," Recording Academy Grammy Awards, May 15, 2017, Accessed July 14, 2018.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "u," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

⁴⁸ Charise L. Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It out Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 100.

⁴⁹ Robinson, "The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar".

worthless to him.

This recoiling away from an idolization of rap is apparent as he explained to *The Fader* about dressing up as Jesus for Halloween in 2014:

If I want to idolize somebody, I'm not going to do a scary monster, I'm not gonna do another artist or a human being — I'm gonna idolize the master, who I feel is the master, and try to walk in his light... It's hard, it's something I probably could never do, but I'm gonna try. Not just with the outfit but with everyday life. The outfit is just the imagery, but what's inside me will display longer.⁵⁰

This connects to the deconstruction found in “u” where he seeks to remove the idols he struggles with in order to have them replaced with his divine master.

Kendrick presents Christianity and details how he reconstructs a new identity by subverting Hip Hop realness in his verses on Flying Lotus’ “Never Catch Me.” Overall, “Never Catch Me” addresses sin and death but ultimately, gives a picture of the hope of life after death. He opens the song with an acknowledgement of his own inner darkness and is amazed at what he sees in himself but in spite of this darkness, his view of “life and death is no mystery” and he “wanna taste it.”⁵¹ Kendrick summarizes this worldview as “hope inside of my bones” and throughout the song describes how one can embrace one’s own death as “life beyond your own life.” Here he provides his listeners an image of a life of hope as experienced on earth and death as the state through which one enters into the greater hope of the afterlife. Within Kendrick’s framing of Christianity on “Never Catch Me,” his fear and anxiety about death can relate to his awareness of his own “dark thoughts,” which make him feel insecure about his “final destination.”⁵² Eventually he embraces that death will come for him but through his conception of Christianity, he can rest, despite the fact that he still does wrong: “Tell me I can live long and I can live wrong and I can live right/ And I can sing songs and I can unite with you that I love, you that I like.”⁵³

As Kendrick explicates on his theology of death, the afterlife and how that informs his earthly existence, his rhymes increase in speed along with the jazz-like melodic underpinnings and bass drum kicking into high gear. As the rhythmic activity increases, the wide-spaced bassline becomes more narrowly spaced as it moves ever-upward towards higher pitches, signaling a move from earth to heaven. The accompanying music video further grounds this image of the afterlife as tied to the particularity of Christianity’s views of life after death, namely, a belief in bodily resurrection. Beginning with a series of shots in an African-American church, focused on two small caskets (indicating the death of two children), the caskets suddenly open

⁵⁰ Deitch Maud “Exclusive: Kendrick Lamar Sings Taylor Swift’s ‘Shake It Off,’” *The Fader*, November 4, 2014, Accessed October 19, 2015.

⁵¹ Flying Lotus featuring Kendrick Lamar, “Never Catch Me,” *You’re Dead!* (Warp, 2014).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Flying Lotus, “Never Catch Me.”

and the resurrected children dance throughout the church in celebration. Their joyous dance eventually leads outside as they are weaving in and out through the children playing on the blacktop. Eventually they jump into the back of a black hearse only to reappear as drivers of the vehicle. As the hearse leaves the church parking lot, the other children chase it into the street and the final image is of the young boy outside of the window smiling. Reversing the tragedy of the two children's death, as now they have come to experience the afterlife in new bodies, can excitingly, and exuberantly dance their way to heaven.

"Never Catch Me" outlines a basic framework of how Kendrick presents Christianity in his rhymes and from that conceptualization, he is able to bring a theology of creation in God's image to his community, a community he believes lacks a helpful identity of self. Slightly reworking the lyrics for "I Am" from the Kendrick Lamar EP for Reebok's "Get Inspired" campaign, Kendrick uses his birth name to connect his identity to his listeners: "Because I am, we are Kendrick Lamar."⁵⁴ Therefore, he presents himself and his listeners, as royalty standing for family, God and honor:

*Like Malcolm X did, I stand for what I believe in
That's family, God and honor
From Chicago, my daddy and my momma
Came into Compton to accomplish one thing: reign supreme
Raise a king named Kendrick
I ain't lying, it stand for "King" and I am one
My unborn son and grandson will live royal⁵⁵*

Furthermore, Kendrick grounds his identity in his Christ as he raps, "Passion in your life, the passion of my Christ is in me/ And if you say it ain't, you may offend me."⁵⁶ It is through Kendrick's use of the spiritual in the presentation of his identity in "I Am" that he strives to bestow this same identity to his listeners.

The importance of utilizing his name as symbolic of the humanity in all of his listeners harkens back to Kendrick's early days as a rapper when he performed under the moniker K. Dot. He outlines in "Kendrick Lamar" from his Compton State of Mind mixtape, "No more K. Dot, my mother had named me Kendrick/ Fuck a stage name, that's the name that I was given/ The only thing that I can identify within this bidness."⁵⁷ To Kendrick, even a stage name is another mask of realness that rappers hide behind removing them further away from a sincere display of their humanity. For example, the white Detroit-based rapper, Eminem, in his music vacillates between

⁵⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Reebok Presents: Kendrick Lamar 'I Am'," Reebok, December 9, 2014, Accessed October 18, 2015.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar," *Compton State of Mind* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2009).

three identities: Eminem, Slim Shady and Marshall Mathers. However, identifying the real human being behind the rhymes is often difficult to locate. Kendrick's return and use of his real name, then, has the meaning of giving his audience the true Kendrick Lamar.

Kendrick not only constructs what identity in his Christ looks like to him but he makes it particular to the African-American experience with the live album version of "i" from *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In the opening stanzas, he discusses suffering, temptation, prayer, baptism, and then, defines the two overarching spiritual forces at work in the world, God and the devil. Sampling the energetic, effervescent and peppy "That Lady" by The Isley Brothers, the song is full of hope amidst the struggles of an existence that seems hopeless. A falling sky, tears, frustrations, misery and war all appear but yet, Kendrick still smiles and is able to preach to his fellow African-Americans raised in places of extremes, that their humanity matters. He leans into the African-American spiritual-blues impulse⁵⁸ with "i" by expressing "joys and sorrows... to affirm an authentic hope in the essential worth of black humanity."⁵⁹

Rapping, "When you lookin' at me, tell me what do you see?," with a lifting vocal inflection on "see," Kendrick asks his listeners whether they are African-American, Caucasian, Asian or any other ethnicity, to look past the identity that American culture or even Hip Hop has placed on him or themselves. To find an authentic identity, according to Kendrick, is to love yourself, telling his listeners to see him (and themselves) for his (and their) God created humanity, as someone "illuminated by the hand of God." "i" could be merely read as a promotion of positive self-esteem and self-image to combat the suicidal thoughts and violence in the streets that Kendrick desperately seeks to end with his music. When explaining who "i" is for, Kendrick invites such a reading:

I wrote a record ["i"] for the homies that's in the penitentiary right now. I also wrote a record ["i"] for these kids that come up to my show with these slashes on they wrist saying they don't wanna live no more. If I say something this blatant, this bold, this simple, they can take reaction from that, they can lock your body, they can't trap your mind for my homies that's in the pen. For the people that's outside they have something more to live for, it starts with yourself first, and you won't be thinking all these negative things that's completely corrupt in your brain.⁶⁰

But another possible reading of "i" is through Kendrick's understanding of Christian identity, where Kendrick is pointing toward a deeper reality of self-rootedness in his Christ, that he believes can transform identity completely. Before his

⁵⁸ Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture*, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1988), 184.

⁵⁹ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 97.

⁶⁰ Kendrick Lamar, Ebro Darden and Peter Rosenberg, "Kendrick Says Macklemore Went Too Far, Who 'i' Is for and the State of Hip Hop."

message of the formation of a new identity through his Christ is given to his African-American audience in "i" (through an impromptu speech and then a freestyle acapella verse), the crowd erupts in shouts as a fight breaks out. Kendrick kills the music and converses with those he knows in the audience, arguing for the sanctity of black lives. After calming the crowd down, he freestyles a verse unaccompanied, particularizing the message of identity found in "i" to African-Americans.

One of the ways Kendrick does this is by reconstructing African-American identity, taking Hip Hop's most controversial word associated with questions of identity and authenticity and redefining it. Using the numerous instances of Oprah Winfrey asking rappers about their use of the N-word as a launching point, Kendrick provides his own reinterpretation of the term. "So I'ma dedicate this one verse to Oprah/ On how the infamous, sensitive N-word control us/ So many artists gave her an explanation to hold us." According to Kendrick, this new explanation of "n****s"⁶¹ comes from Ethiopia:

N-E-G-U-S definition: royalty; King royalty – wait listen
N-E-G-U-S description: Black emperor, King, ruler, now let me finish
The history books overlook the word and hide it
America tried to make it to a house divided
The homies don't recognize we been using it wrong
So I'ma break it down and put my game in a song
*N-E-G-U-S, say it with me*⁶²

By giving his listeners this Afrocentric approach, that neither follows the original intent of the term as a means through which black humanity was stripped away or its redefinition as a term of endearment in Hip Hop, Kendrick has reconstructed the term to form a new identity and calls on his audience to embrace it. In addition, giving the weight of royalty to "n****s," like in "I Am," makes the term a recognition of black humanity as being wholly human. Kendrick's goal is to redeem the term to become an essential part of black identity and then, tie "Negus" to Hip Hop realness with the final line, "Kendrick Lamar, by far, the realest Negus alive."⁶³ Natalie Graham writing on To Pimp a Butterfly states that Kendrick views blackness through place (as is the case here, Ethiopia) "instead of universalizing blackness, Lamar's work calls into being a black universe of interlocked galaxies of evil and good where 'every n***** is a star.'"⁶⁴

Collapsing the Distance between Ghetto and Gospel

The subversion of the Hip Hop real and the reconstruction of Kendrick's

⁶¹ Kendrick Lamar, "i," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Graham, "What Slaves We Are," 124.

formulation of a Christian identity to remove the chains of oppression are continuous themes throughout Kendrick's music but the most intriguing aspect of his body of work is when Kendrick collapses the themes of life in the ghetto with his presentation of Christian spirituality. Not as a reconciliation of the sacred and profane⁶⁵ but to "provide marginalized communities with robust opportunities to wrestle with the "thickness" of life—grappling with those elements of their quotidian existence—negative and positive, in order to generate a sense of meaning and purpose."⁶⁶ Kendrick recounted to Vanity Fair, "What gives me an advantage in my upbringing is the duality of seeing one of the most beautiful moments of me being 6 years old, to the most tragic moment of being 13 or 14, and make that connection so the person [listening] can really see the conflict... And I wanted to tell that story."⁶⁷

In "Ab-Soul's Outro" on Section.80, Kendrick ends the song with, "I'm not the next pop star, I'm not the next socially aware rapper/ I am a human motherfucking being/ Over dope ass instrumentation/ Kendrick Lamar."⁶⁸ He takes on the two outer extremes of Hip Hop identity, trap and conscious, and constructs another identity not limited by either, "a human motherfucking being" who raps over beats, also known as himself. This is recognition of the restrictive forces of either Hip Hop identity that keeps one from being fully human. And humans are complex, not easily reduced to one stream of thoughts and beliefs, as he makes apparent when he raps earlier in the song, "So the next time I talk about money, hoes, clothes, God and history/ All in the same sentence/ Just know I meant it, and you felt it."⁶⁹ It is this side-by-side appearance of Hip Hop tropes and religion that aims to broaden the knowledge of Kendrick's audience wherever they fall on the spectrum of identity, Hip Hop or otherwise.⁷⁰ His knowledge of Compton and Hip Hop informs his spirituality, which allows him to see that the street and Hip Hop are not the totality of reality for him or other African-Americans. Kendrick discusses this in an instructive interview with the New York Times.

⁶⁵ Jon Michael Spencer, *Re-searching Black Music*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 70-71.

⁶⁶ Summary of Anthony Pinn on cultural productions in Hills, Darrius D. "We Gon Be Alright: Kendrick Lamar and the Theology of Affirmation" in *You Gon' Learn Today: The Aesthetics of Christians in Hip Hop* (Forthcoming, TBD), 7.

⁶⁷ Robinson, "The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar."

⁶⁸ Kendrick Lamar, "Ab-Soul's Outro."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ab-Soul explains the song's perspective in Matt Conover, "Human Beings on Paper: A Night with Ab-Soul & Kendrick Lamar," *Pretty Much Amazing*, October 22, 2012, Accessed July 14, 2018: "I really don't know man. I think that's really where spirituality might kick in. You have, somehow, a feeling to it. It's a... [pauses, looks across the room] lane. A way to... still, really be myself, the whole time, like talk about my things, but do it in a way that it could be played after Rick Ross. I'm kicking all the shit that Immortal Technique would, over Lex Luger. That's the goal. Doing it in a way that I'm not preaching. I don't know shit either. [Soul holds his hand out and apart, open palmed] It's just the left and the right, righteous and wrongs—smashed together [bringing his hands together]."

Joe Coscarelli explains:

Mr. Lamar is working to purify hip-hop, a genre he hopes to ground in his true experiences of growing up poor, the son of a former gangbanger. He offers a corrective, or at least an alternative, to the opulent fabulism of some mainstream rap.⁷¹

Kendrick states:

You know the songs that are out – we all love these songs, they sell a lot of singles and make these record labels a lot of money. But those ‘really living’ in the streets don’t want to hear boasts about murder and drug dealing, he continued. They want to get away from that. If it comes across as just a game all the time, the kids are going to think it’s just a game. From my perspective, I can only give you the good with the bad. It’s bigger than a responsibility, it’s a calling.⁷²

Where Kendrick mixes the themes the clearest is in the aptly titled, “Kush and Corinthians” a “quote-unquote religious song” where he is “trying to find answers” because according to Kendrick, “that’s the space I speak from and a lot of people can relate.”⁷³ Marijuana and one of the books of bible collapse into the space of a psychedelically vibe-laden beat similar to the feel and tone of “A.D.H.D”. Kendrick, here, is subverting a sanitized version of the narrative of Christian life (often espoused by mainstream American Evangelical culture), by injecting into that white-washed narrative, struggles had by those with addictions but wanting to live a more righteous life. Discussing “Kush and Corinthians” with MTV he said, “I’m a sinner and I’m trying to figure myself out,”⁷⁴ which he expresses in the song as: “Have you ever had known a saint that was taking sinner’s advice?/ Well it’s probably you, am I right? If I’m wrong, you a fucking lie.”⁷⁵ It is that both/and-ness of sinner and saint where Kendrick’s music rejects religionism⁷⁶ but furthermore, the faith context that Kendrick presents sees humans with the characteristics of sinner and saint. Kendrick’s flow on the chorus of the song lands heavily on the beat and is rhythmically square as he raps:

*Ride to it, ride to it, cause you never know
when a bullet might hit and you die to it, die to it
Die to it, die to it, live your life, live it right
Be different, do different things, don’t do it like
he did, cause he ain’t what you is, but we can win
Wait, let’s get straight to the point*⁷⁷

⁷¹ Joe Coscarelli, “Kendrick Lamar on His New Album and the Weight of Clarity,” The New York Times, March 21, 2015.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Andrew Nosnitsky, “Kendrick Lamar Talks Rap, Religion and the Reagan Era | MTV Hive,” MTV Hive, July 11, 2011, Accessed October 18, 2015.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Kendrick Lamar, “Kush and Corinthians,” *Section.80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011).

⁷⁶ Daniel White Hodge writes in *Hip Hop’s Hostile Gospel*, “Religionism is “either/or” never in between or maybe; it either is or it is not,” 168.

⁷⁷ Kendrick Lamar, “Kush and Corinthians.”

This fitting into the beat with his rhymes musically sets the place where Kendrick should be as he locks into the mode of holiness as a saint. But then in the first verse, his flow enters in on a sixteenth note pickup instead of on the downbeat and lyrically, Kendrick wavers between his two modes of being, sinner and saint, contextualized within life's purpose:

*To the meaning of life, what's my purpose?
Maybe this earth is, ain't a good place to be
How far is Heaven? Let's see
Is it in the clouds like they said it would be?
I wonder when I die will he give me receipts?
I wonder will the eyes of the Lord look at me?
Look at me, look at me, I'm a loser, I'm a winner
I'm good, I'm bad, I'm a Christian, I'm a sinner
I'm humble, I'm loud, I'm righteous, I'm a killer
What I'm doing, I'm saying that I'm human⁷⁸*

Christian life, Kendrick explains, becomes murky with sin but on the other hand, a life of sin calls into question Christian faith. This falls in line with what New Testament writer, Paul of Tarsus, writes about himself, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."⁷⁹ Which generally surprises readers of the New Testament epistles since Paul, after a transformative experience with Jesus, is presented as one of the most righteous and selfless disciples of first century Christianity. The dual nature of Kendrick in this song operates in a more biblical pattern of thought where in the overarching and individual narratives of personalities in the bible, one can find God "in the oddest places of them all: the murk, the mire, and the sludge of life."⁸⁰ In "Kush and Corinthians" Kendrick is aware he is a sinner yet knows this is not his identity because when he presents Christianity, faith should transform him: "As I open this book and then burn up some of this reefer/ My plan is to figure out the world and escape all my demons/ I'm dying inside, I wonder if Zion inside the Heavens."⁸¹ Presumably, Kendrick is referring to the first book of Corinthians in this song and Paul's exhortation to the Corinthian church to move away from immorality, putting their trust in the absurdness of the resurrection of Jesus. Kendrick, in the song's narrative, sees this as the hope for himself but also his community and the world. In the closing of the song, BJ the Chicago Kid sings poignantly, "Lord, what kind of life is this?"⁸² and lets "this" hang on the highest note of the phrase, giving time for the listener to ponder the question in light of what

⁷⁸ Lamar, "Kush and Corinthians."

⁷⁹ 1 Tim. 1:15.

⁸⁰ Hodge, *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel*, 168.

⁸¹ Lamar, "Kush and Corinthians."

⁸² Ibid.

Kendrick presented earlier in the song. Then BJ ends the song not with an answer but with: "Mama, I just wanna sing/ Mama said, according to get everything/ You gotta risk everything/ So I'm smoking my kush reading Corinthians."⁸³ Providing one last time the matrix of a lived Christian life, sinner and saint and BJ crooning and ad-libbing a melody on "war," Kendrick performs the spiritual war of the relationship between temptations and holiness.

"Kush and Corinthians" explores spiritual wrestlings within a mostly personalized narrative but interacts at moments with the communal, in how his family and friends have had a positive or negative impact on his life. "Alright" from *To Pimp a Butterfly* takes Kendrick's narrative of spiritual transformation in "Kush and Corinthians" and applies it to his community of Compton. He does not provide his community with a multi-step plan on how to address the issues of a life of struggle in an urban context but rather provides hopeful and liberating news, "Nazareth, I'm fucked up/ Homie you fucked up/ But if God got us we then gon' be alright."⁸⁴

As Travis Harris notes on the Sunday Oldskool podcast, the reference to the N-word in the song's hook is about recognition of the status of African-Americans in American society but despite this dehumanization of black humanity, Kendrick presses into that caricature of "n****" by telling its listeners, "we gon' be alright."⁸⁵ This banger song, which has the most traditional Hip Hop sound of all the songs on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, is infectiously cheerful and bright, with a jazz choir accompaniment and a sultry, growling saxophone appearing throughout. The drum machine, 808s and choir is consistent throughout the song, an embodiment of the continuous struggles of life in the ghetto. Nevertheless, the saxophone is continuously improvising, as a sign of freedom and hope but this does not go without warning as it begins to growl and explore notes outside of the key of the song. Simultaneously, Kendrick discusses the dangers of Lucy, a personification of Lucifer: "What you want, a house or a car/ 40 acres and a mule, a piano a guitar/ Anything, see my name is Lucy, I'm your dog/ Motherfucker you can live at the mall."⁸⁶

In a conversation with Hip Hop producer, Rick Rubin, Kendrick recalls Pharrell repeatedly saying "alright" over the beat and then wondered, "What does 'alright' represent? What does 'we gonna be alright' represent?"⁸⁷ Systemic, circumstantial, personal and spiritual suffering⁸⁸ all occur on the track and Kendrick is able to

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Alright," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015).

⁸⁵ Travis Harris, Cray Allred, and Sam Bennett, "Sunday Oldskool: 'Alright' by Kendrick Lamar," *Christ and Pop Culture*, July 28, 2015, Accessed October 18, 2015.

⁸⁶ Lamar, "Alright."

⁸⁷ Kendrick Lamar, and Rick Rubin, "Kendrick Lamar Talks To Rick Rubin," *GQ*, September 28, 2016, Accessed July 14, 2018.

⁸⁸ Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2010), 77-78.

address all of them with the lead-in to each occurrence of the hook. First, he speaks of being hurt and feeling low, wondering where African-Americans can go in a system that is unable to be followed by black-skinned folks in the first place, especially since it is a system of laws that disproportionately affects African-Americans.⁸⁹ Within that conversation is an understanding that enforcers of the law view black lives as less than other lives, more interested in killing blacks in the streets than going through the court system. Kendrick presents in “Alright” the tension between wanting vigilante justice against a system of laws that is broken and the desire to not give into killing another human being by rapping, “I’m at the preacher’s door/ My knees getting’ weak and my gun might blow but we gon’ be alright.”⁹⁰ It is this state of being on the verge of violence to right the wrongs done against the African-American community and also seeking out God’s will that Kendrick is able to tell his audience that blacks as a people are going to be alright. Kendrick, with these lyrics, points his community to the spiritual as a liberating force, which had real world implications as Black Lives Matter protesters used the hook of “Alright” as a repeated chant in the same way that “We Shall Overcome” was instrumental to the freedom struggle in the 1960s.⁹¹ The song becomes a hopeful new black national anthem in spite of police brutality against African-Americans and the continued destruction of black bodies.

However, this song is also about Kendrick as an artist and his influence, trying to present who he really is to his listeners. He admits that he is difficult to love, afraid of change and despite dark prayerful nights, he is all right too. Furthermore, he explains his motivation for writing music, “I rap, I black on track so rest assured/ My rights, my wrongs; I’ll write till I’m right with God.”⁹² The spiritual aspect of Kendrick’s music runs deeply as a continual inspiration, which is for not only his liberation but also engaging with a community that in the post-soul era was distrustful of the church. Those youth now look for answers from within their community and no longer look to the church, since the church is no longer interested in speaking from the sufferings of blacks in the ghetto but like much of Hip Hop, espouses a focus on material wealth over spiritual health. In that space Kendrick operates, discussing the suffering of blacks in their annihilated environment, he then presents liberation through his presentation and understanding of Christianity, which is how Black churches traditionally work within their communities.⁹³ However, “Alright” ends with the poem that is interspersed throughout tracks on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, cementing the conflicted feelings Kendrick has regarding his influence, but

⁸⁹ Harris, “Sunday Oldskool.”

⁹⁰ Lamar, Kendrick. “Alright.”

⁹¹ Aisha Harris, “Has Kendrick Lamar Recorded the New Black National Anthem?”, *Slate*, August 3, 2015, Accessed February 10, 2016.

⁹² Lamar, “Alright.”

⁹³ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 20-21.

with expanded content that speaks of the duality of "Alright": "I didn't wanna self-destruct, the evils of Lucy was all around me/ So I went runnin' for answers."⁹⁴

To Pimp a Butterfly is not the first time Kendrick has questioned his influence and looked for answers, as the twenty-minute song trilogy of "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst" and "Real" on *good kid, m.A.A.d city* reflects on similar themes. Here in grand and specific personal strokes, Kendrick sets these sacred and profane identities as co-equals to undermine the real in Hip Hop and reconstruct a new identity, one that has knowledge of the artifacts of Hip Hop and how Christian faith can intersect and interact with it. The song triptych begins after what listeners presume is the young Kendrick shooting a member of a rival gang, who turns out to be his own brother. In a typical narrative move for Kendrick, he lays out two different stories of the reality of life in the ghetto in the first two verses of "Sing About Me." Then in the final verse, he provides his commentary on both situations, as well as his personal response to the events that unfolded. Kendrick explained to *Complex* the personal nature of the song, "In that song I'm breaking down the actual incident that changed my life: One of my partners had got smoked and I was right there to witness it."⁹⁵

The first verse is from the frame of reference of Kendrick's friend, discussing life in the ghetto, gang violence and the absurdity of it all but still wanting to be part of that community. However, it is mainly about the brother of the friend who died in Kendrick's arms and the desire for the world not forget about him. Kendrick's goal is to portray a real story of death and violence from Compton so that he can communicate that the cycle of violence found in his community is not a means of escape but rather a trap. In the song, Kendrick's friend becomes vindictive and goes after those who shot the friend's brother. However, the sound of three gunshots cutting off Kendrick rapping the line, "And if I die before your album drop I hope,"⁹⁶ indicates that the friend also dies by gun violence. The beat continues without interruption but the hook delays in coming back in to let the reality of death and violence sink in. One can interpret this as a moment of silence for the dead, while the marching beat of the drum represents that the war in the streets continues. In addition, right as hope was about to enter the friend's story, it was dashed away forever in his death.

The second verse is about the friend's sister, vacillating between the friend telling the story of his sister and the sister explaining her situation through her viewpoint. The friend opens up with how upset he is at Kendrick for writing a song about his sister, who involved herself in prostitution in order to get by. The song

⁹⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Alright."

⁹⁵ Insanul Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city.'" *Complex*, October 23, 2012.

⁹⁶ Kendrick Lamar, "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst," *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2012).

referenced is from the *Section.80* mixtape, "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)," which describes the sister's sexual molestation as a nine year old child. Experiencing sexual abuse in a community that views black women's bodies as objects, in Kendrick's estimation, is why Keisha fell into prostitution. Kendrick sees dignity in her life as he describes her in "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)" through God's eyes as "beautiful," "God's temple" and a "castle," and then describes how he hopes that she will find Christian religion and liberation through Christ.⁹⁷ "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)" is more than an honest interaction with Keisha, it also serves as a vivid and tragic story to tell Kendrick's eleven-year-old sister the reason why she does not need to fall into the same path of prostitution.

In "Sing About Me," however, the friend is upset that Kendrick related a song about his sister to the world, telling Kendrick that to him the song, "Just put her on blast and shit/ Judging her past and shit."⁹⁸ Then the friend's sister takes over the narrative telling Kendrick that "And I'ma need that 40 dollars even if I gotta/ Fuck, suck and swallow in the parking lot."⁹⁹ As she goes on to explain, her situation is so bad that the only way to make anything positive out of it is to survive by selling oneself into prostitution. When the brother returns as narrator, he yells at Kendrick, "But fuck that "Sorry for your loss shit"/ My sister died in vain, but what point are you trying to gain/ If you can't fit the pumps I walk in?/ I'll wait."¹⁰⁰ Here the vocals stop against the background of a persistent beat to build up enough tension so that when "Your rebuttal a little too late"¹⁰¹ comes in it slams like a door in Kendrick's face. The sister then tells Kendrick to leave any mention of her off the album and that her life is going great. So sure she is in her path that she brags that she will live longer than Kendrick and "never fade away."¹⁰² Then, as Kendrick channels her story, she goes on to describe how she feels Kendrick can help her by sending people her way for paid sex. The brag of "never fading away"¹⁰³ is derailed as Kendrick's rap fades until it is no longer audible, all while she hangs onto an identity born out of few options (through the avenue of prostitution), a subtle musical effect to indicate that her life led to a disastrous end. As with the first verse, the beat continues while yet another life is lost to the streets.

In the final verse, Kendrick adds his own voice in the story, responding to the now dead friend and how he sees within all three of their stories (friend, brother and sister), and except for the grace of God, he could have ended up very similar to them. Kendrick addresses his friend with empathy and understanding in very humanly

⁹⁷ Kendrick Lamar, "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)," *Section.80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011).

⁹⁸ Kendrick Lamar, "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst."

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

ways, not as another story that he can use to promote his own agenda or fame but to reach beyond the grave in love to a friend whose life was lost. It is important to note as Natalie Graham explains, "In 'Sing About Me,' call-and-response creates a dynamic series of possible narratives which simultaneously problematizes what might be interpreted as the official or original story and casts doubt on Lamar's authority to tell."¹⁰⁴ Operating on the axis between a life in the ghetto and a life of Christian spirituality, Kendrick in his lyrics produces an identity, which always questions its motives, and reassess how much good one is doing in the lives of others with one's work. It is that self-reflection and humbleness that comes across through the final verse as Kendrick, in conversation with his dead friend, is able to speak in real terms to him.

The verse opens with Kendrick thinking about these three deaths, how these deaths make him think about his own death and what these deaths mean within an eternal context:

*Sometimes I look in a mirror and ask myself
Am I really scared of passing away
If it's today I hope I hear a
Cry out from heaven so loud it can water down a demon
With the Holy Ghost till it drown in the blood of Jesus*¹⁰⁵

He moves from contemplating his own death, straight to the cross of Christ as the way through which death is conquered. Then similar to "Alright," Kendrick speaks about writing raps as a way through which he can show his "allegiance with the other side," namely, God. This spiritual opening to the final verse frames how Kendrick reacts and apologizes to his friend about how he unjustly used the sister's story.

*And your sister's situation was the one that put me
In a direction to speak of something that's realer than the TV screen
By any means, wasn't trying to offend or come between
Her personal life, I was like "it need to be told"*¹⁰⁶

Bringing it full circle, he uses his faith to empathize with those who are weaker by crying and praying for them to be strong one day. Furthermore, he confirms all their humanity by rapping that he's "Fighting for your rights, even when you're wrong."¹⁰⁷ Then, as Kendrick hopes that he too will be sung about when he is gone, the drum machine cuts out for the first time in the song as he raps, "Now am I worth

¹⁰⁴ Graham, Natalie. "What Slaves We Are," 126.

¹⁰⁵ Kendrick Lamar, "Sing About Me/I'm Dying of Thirst."

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

it?/ Did I put enough work in?"¹⁰⁸ These are essential questions of identity framed within conceptualizations of the worth of one's life. The continuing beat of life stops in that moment as Kendrick contemplates his worth in an American society that does not value black bodies and a community that sees too many killings. The returning hook now transforms to a plea from Kendrick that people will remember him once he dies and the voice of a woman takes the hook from him to end the song before a small skit unfolds.

In the skit, the young Kendrick tells his homies, "I'm tired of this shit. I'm tired of fucking running. I'm tired of this shit. My brother, homie."¹⁰⁹ Then "Dying of Thirst" interrupts the distraught teen with how the relationship between God's law and gospel fits into the context of the narrative of gang violence as found in Compton. But the song is also setting listeners up for the last song in the tryptic, "Real," where Kendrick provides another path out of the neediness of those struggling on the street, who can only imagine limited options to help them navigate that environment. He speaks, in "Real," about the reality of their situation, subverts what being real means and constructs what true realness is. However, before one can construct a new identity, a recognition must occur, where life no longer works in the muck and mire of one's own brokenness. To realize that the well of money, women and violence is dry, unable to quench the spiritual thirst that Kendrick sees in himself and the people of his community.

"Dying of Thirst" musically constructs from a choir of female voices, brittle bass drum, ringing hi-hat and for emphasis on certain lines, a synthesized bass. Kendrick's flow carries the short phrasing, cadence and inflection of an African-American preacher whooping a sermon, with "uhs" sprinkled in after each line to mimic that style of preaching.¹¹⁰ This purposeful callback to the stylistic sounds of black preaching ties the song into that spiritual heritage and grounds Kendrick as a preacher in the minds of his listeners. Within this imitation, Kendrick is telling his younger self from the skits, that he is having an identity crisis and the reason why has spiritual implications:

Tired of running
Tired of hunting
My own kind
But retiring nothing
Tires are steady screeching, the driver is rubbing
Hands on the wheel, who said we wasn't?
Dying of thirst
Dying of thirst

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 89 and 93.

*Dying of thirst*¹¹¹

When Kendrick begins to rap the line, “dying of thirst,” the bass comes in for the first time, grounding the song in the image of spiritual thirst that is leading to one’s death. Essentially, the root cause of Kendrick’s commentary is that it pains him to see individuals in his community chase things that do not satisfy their thirst. Throughout the song Kendrick continues the themes of violence, drug dealing, money and power but now defines that seeking after and engaging in those things as sin. So overwhelming is the amount of sin that Kendrick has engaged with in his life that he has lost count. He questions what he and his people are doing because these things have eternal consequences, “Hell is hot, fire is proven/To burn for eternity.”¹¹² His people are feeling the pain of running in this life of suffering and trying to get by but according to Kendrick, the church is reaching out to them. However, most in his community have no intention of visiting the church and return to the gang violence they already engage in. Nevertheless, Kendrick has the final word, telling them that their identity, which spans generations as if given at birth in his community, is one that is “dying of thirst.”

In the final verse, it is even more explicit in addressing Kendrick’s and his community’s temptations as well as their spiritual need. The verse opens with a line about sins and the need for a well to take care of the drought that is occurring in their souls. And where do these sins of “Fuck the world, my sex slave/ Money, pussy and greed what’s my next crave” lead?¹¹³ To the grave. Thus why Kendrick tells his listeners what his mother said:

*“Backwards,” my mama say.
“See a pastor, give me a promise
What if today was the rapture, and you completely tarnished
The truth will set you free, so to me be completely honest
You dying of thirst
You dying of thirst
So hop in that water, and pray that it works”*¹¹⁴

She addresses that Kendrick is completely without hope because he is tarnished and that if he does not change his ways he will not be part of God’s end times rapture. However, she directs him to find hope in a truth that sets him free, the truth that is the gospel of Jesus and if he accepts this truth, seek the waters of baptism. At the call of baptism, the music completely drops out to drive home the importance of this spiritual water in addressing the thirst that Kendrick feels. A call that Kendrick took up in real life at 16 and “again in my 20s—just for that reassurance and belief in

¹¹¹ Kendrick Lamar, “Sing About Me/I’m Dying of Thirst.”

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Kendrick Lamar, “Sing About Me/I’m Dying of Thirst.”

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

God.”¹¹⁵ This section of the song also contains the only literal reference to water, which packs a punch because the response to the sins and temptations of the song is to have faith in the grace of the waters of baptism. In addition, Kendrick unpacking “I’m Dying of Thirst” for Complex states as much: “[The song] represents being baptized, the actual water, getting dipped in holy water. It represents when my whole spirit changed, when my life starts – my life that you know right now, that’s when it starts.”¹¹⁶

The female choir comes back in and then so does the drum machine as if the beat of life that was consistent and never ceasing in “Sing About Me” would continue to march on. But no, the music is cut off, returning to the young Kendrick still yelling, “Fuck. I’m tired of this shit,” only to be interrupted by a woman (voiced by Maya Angelou), admonishing Kendrick and his friends for having guns. Building off the themes of “Dying of Thirst,” she too tells them that they are heading towards death and are in a spiritual drought. The answer is that they need holy water, to experience baptism with the spirit of God and receive Him as their personal savior. She then takes them through the Sinner’s Prayer:

*Lord God, I come to you a sinner
And I humbly repent for my sins
I believe that Jesus is Lord
I believe you raised him from the dead
I would ask that Jesus come into my life
And to be my Lord and Savior
I receive Jesus to take control of my life
And that I may live with him from this day forward
Thank you Lord Jesus for saving me with your precious blood
In Jesus name. Amen.*¹¹⁷

However, she does not end there, she tells them that now that they have accepted Jesus as their savior that their identity has changed: “Alright now, remember this day: the start of a new life/ Your real life.”¹¹⁸ As “Sing About Me” was rooted in the real life story of Kendrick’s friend being shot, the skit at the end of “I’m Dying of Thirst” is also based on a real situation:

The same day [my homeboy got shot], I ran into an older lady. I don’t want to say she was religious, but she was a spiritual lady who broke down what life is really about to us. ‘I’m Dying of Thirst’ represents being in a situation where all this happens throughout the day, but at the end of the day we run into this particular lady and she breaks down the story of God, positivity, life, being free, and being real with yourself. She was letting us know what’s really

¹¹⁵ Lisa Robinson, “The Gospel According to Kendrick Lamar.” *Vanity Fair*. June 28, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Insanul Ahmed, “The Making of Kendrick Lamar’s ‘good kid, m.A.A.d city’.” *Complex*, October 23, 2012.

¹¹⁷ Kendrick Lamar, “Sing About Me/I’m Dying of Thirst.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

real. Because you have to leave this earth and speak to somebody of a higher power.¹¹⁹

The collapsing of ghetto and gospel in “Sing About Me/Dying of Thirst” is building up to this point, to the creation of a new identity that is further explored in the final song of the narrative of good kid, m.A.A.d city, “Real.”

Conclusion

The hook of “Real” opens up sounding like a celebration, “Look in the mirror and know I’m there/With my hands in the air/I’m proud to say yea”¹²⁰ and the drums only come in when “I’m real, I’m real, I’m really really real”¹²¹ is sung repeatedly. This highly repetitive concentration on the word “real” cements this new reality of realness in the life of Kendrick Lamar. This is a welcome home to a new identity that one can find in his Christ, which can extend to the homies and women in his life. Following the narrative structure of “Sing About Me,” Kendrick in the first verse speaks of a woman obsessed with materialistic things, in the second a homie searching after money, women and violence, and lastly, Kendrick provides his response and commentary to lay out a larger point about what makes a person real.

“You living in a world that come with plan B,” he raps in each verse, and what is plan B? Kendrick’s meaning is clearest in the final verse where he states that Plan B is “a scapegoat,” which may be a possible reference to the Jewish Day of Atonement, where it was prescribed that the Levitical priests sacrifice a goat but then also send a goat out from the camp to bear all the sins of the people.¹²² Though Kendrick does not explicitly refer to Christianity in “Real,” given that the song occurs right after the explicitly Christian “Sinner’s Prayer,” Plan B could also be interpreted as reference to Jesus as the scapegoat.

However, Kendrick also presents two other options, what he calls Plan A and Plan C. Plan A is the giving into the world of sin as it is and not deviating from that path. It is a plan that cannot guarantee fulfillment, comes with a cost and ends in yet another mistake. Plan C on the surface appears as a solution to Plan A, but is so ephemeral that finding successful escape is impossible and is an excuse instead of transforming one’s identity. However, Kendrick as an alternative to both presents Plan B, in “Real”. Whether Plan B is a reference to the Jewish Day of Atonement, Christ or something else, Plan B, to Kendrick, is the reality of a world where love, hope, peace, and liberation exist. As Kendrick explained to Complex, regarding the meaning of “Real:”

That’s the start of me recognizing everything I was doing throughout that day, it wasn’t real. Everybody has their own perception of what a real ‘n****’ is. Most of the time a real n**** is a street cat or someone putting in some type of work and doing violence. That’s what we thought

¹¹⁹ Ahmed, “The Making of Kendrick Lamar’s ‘good kid, m.A.A.d city’.”

¹²⁰ Kendrick Lamar, “Real,” *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg Entertainment: 2012).

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Lev. 16: 8–10.

they was. Someone who's about that life.

But on that record, it was me getting an understanding of what real is, and my pops breaking down on that record. It shows the influence he had on my life.

Real is taking care of your family. Real is responsibility. Real is believing in a high power, believing in God.

Real is having morals. Real is carrying yourself in a manner where you're not influenced by anybody else. You have your own mind, your own outlook on life. You're not doing what's just the trend or doing what people want you to do.¹²³

Kendrick operates out of love for both the men and women in his communal context, where in his final verse he raps "love" fourteen times, which accompanies Anna Wise singing, "love" along with him. He takes the things that his homies and the women he attracts love and flips it around to be about loving them and what their lives have to offer. Nevertheless, the one caveat to this love is that love does not matter unless Kendrick is able to see that his humanity is important, in spite of living in an environment and culture that does not value his life. Following this string of "loves," he questions, within the context of his liberated identity, if he should hate the very things he used to love: partying, women, street credibility, and in a callback to "Backseat Freestyle," money, power and respect. He summarizes these Hip Hop tropes of being real by rapping, "Or hatin' the fact that none of that shit make me real."¹²⁴

While Kendrick's rap ends with that line, the music continues as his answering machine plays back a message from his parents. His father redefines for Kendrick what realness truly means: "Any n**** can kill a man, that don't make you a real n****. Realness is responsibility, realness is taking care of your motherfucking family, realness is God, n****."¹²⁵ Kendrick's mom builds on the father's advice, telling Kendrick, "Look, the neighbors say they seen you and your little friends over there by the Food 4 Less, and they was preaching to you over there telling you about the good book because right about now that's what ya'll need."¹²⁶ For Kendrick and his parents, being real is finding an identity in God, not in the Hip Hop tropes of money, power and respect. Kendrick's mom further encourages him, now that he has found an authentic identity, to bring back this message of hope and liberation through the spiritual to the black and brown kids of his city, the very encouragement Kendrick believes they desperately need.

Liberation through the spiritual, as Kendrick relates in his music, becomes one birthed out of systemic, circumstantial, and personal struggles. Through Kendrick's

¹²³ Insanul Ahmed, "The Making of Kendrick Lamar's 'good kid, m.A.A.d city'." *Complex*, October 23, 2012.

¹²⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Real."

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

recreation of realness, he does not look at judgement on his brothas and sistas on the street but sees with renewed "optics," loving them, but not wanting them to remain in their struggles. By encountering the struggles of others as well as his own, he reflects on the impossibility of keeping God's law ("Alright"), the pain that comes with sin ("Sing About Me/Dying of Thirst") and why he needs to rely on his spirituality in the transformation of his identity ("Real"). As Macon argues, "For African people to be liberated through Hip Hop and any other form of African art, a spiritual component coupled with an Afrocentric consciousness must be utilized at the core of its production."¹²⁷ By moving along the axis between life in poor African-American urban spaces and Christian spirituality, Kendrick's music is providing a vision of liberation for his community. Kendrick arrives at realness through an identity from a higher power and able to address even contemporary issues found in the streets of the ghetto.

In Tupac's final interview with Vibe magazine, he claimed that the church, being more interested in making money for itself than speaking into the lives of those on the street, is the reason why kids of the Hip Hop generation were not going to church.¹²⁸ Tupac seeing the spiritual need and hunger of the people because of the church's lack of interaction with their community, sought to point his community to God through his music. In the same sense, Kendrick is looking to do the same, but he takes it a step further than Tupac does in this interview calling into question the very meaning of realness to liberate his community. Therein lies the focal point in which Kendrick can address the needs of his community; by showing that the whole system is broken and needs an entirely new structure. Not to simply turn to the next page with a new program aimed at addressing the woes of the Compton. Kendrick, on the other hand, seeks to transform the system of identity in Compton and then provides to his audience where he believes they can reconstruct an authentic identity, through and with God via spiritual liberation. To be real in Hip Hop but more importantly, in life, for Kendrick, is to become a sincere human being that makes up of a range of emotions and identities, which intersect with and transformed by the spiritual. Therein lies one of the goals of Kendrick's musical output, to transform Hip Hop identity by bringing into conversation with one another, spirituality and African-American street culture, in order to recreate realness through the lens of his framing of Christianity and provide to his community a sense of hope, peace, and liberation.

¹²⁷ Macon, "To Pimp a Caterpillar," 2.

¹²⁸ Tupac Shakur, "Tupac Shakur: The Lost Interview, Pt. 6," Vibe, Accessed October 18, 2015.

Editors' Note on the N word:

Throughout the essay, we censor the N word because the author is White. We do not find it acceptable in any situation for Whites to use the N word, even when they are quoting Blacks. Relating directly to this article, while singing M.A.A.D City during Kenrick Lamar's Hangout Festival in Alabama, a White young woman repeatedly uses the N word and Lamar immediately stops performing the song, and tells her "You gotta bleep one single word."¹²⁹ This situation highlights the issue of Whites saying the N word, even when they are quoting lyrics. Our argument against Whites using the N word centers on the long history of White Supremacy connected to using the word with a particular emphasis on the slave trade. In one particular instance, the Harper's Weekly reported on July 13, 1862 that W.H. Russell wrote this about a slave auction: "The negro was sold to one of the bystanders, and walked off with his bundle God knows where. " niXXers is cheap," was the only remark of the bystanders" (pg. 447). This statement reveals the connection between, on one hand, a slave trade that directly rips apart Black families while dehumanizing them to property, and on the other hand, a phrase used to name, characterize the situation, and identify the enslaved people. This traumatizing history can be traumatizing to African descendant readers who may, while not expecting to, read the word and become triggered.

¹²⁹ BBC News - Kendrick Lamar Stops White Fan using N-word on Stage at Concert (May 22, 2018) Accessed July 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44209141>

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From Yeezus to Pablo: An Existential Theology between God, Blackness, and Being

Shea Watts

Abstract

Kanye West has transformed and transfigured from a young rapper representing the Southside of Chicago, to an icon, a rap genius, a god. His persona has continually evolved from his arrival on the Hip Hop scene, leading to his emergence as, "Yeezus." This essay argues for an investigation of Kanye's theological claims through the lens of his own body, particularly the balance between how he conveys what it is like to be a black man in an American culture plagued by racism and the potential of the black body to assert its incarnate godlikeness in his music. In addition, this essay explores West's newest record, *The Life of Pablo*, and its implications for Yeezus. The results of the study highlight Kanye's evolution—somewhere between "Yeezus," "black god," "new slave," and now, "Pablo" (Paul). I argue that Yeezus represents a deification and *The Life of Pablo* is a de-deification, as communicated in the words of Kanye himself.

Introduction

"I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High."

— *Psalm 82:6, KJV*

Simply speaking the name Kanye West elicits conflicting responses. Whether one is a critic or a fan, one cannot deny that his music and persona continue to draw attention from millions of people around the world. This essay seeks to lift up the factors— beyond the artist, the Tweets, the fashion shows, the revelry — that shape the complexity of Kanye West's understanding and depiction of his identity as an artist, as well as his cultural influence within his social milieu. To that end, I utilize a method that Daniel White Hodge calls "ethnolifehistory," a method that "pushes beyond lyrical analysis and researcher-implied meanings, and asks for a much deeper and broader scope of the artist or artists behind the music, and what factors shape them and their cultural products—indeed, the 'mapping' of a 'new terrain.'"¹ Further, ethnolifehistory focuses on "major life events, the artists' cultural phenomena and the role and changing impact of religiosity throughout the artist's life and work."² I also rely on ideas from James Cone's ideas of black liberation theology, the realities of racism and oppression, and the notions of embodiment and incarnation, to explore Kanye's conflicting claims to be Yeezus, while simultaneously identifying as a "god," "new slave," and now, "Pablo." This approach opens out space to show the connection between the "why" and "how" of Kanye's cultural output and life philosophy.³

On the one hand, Kanye's "self-affirmation" is analogous to Cone's unapologetic assertion: "Black Power, in short, is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness. It means that the black man will not be poisoned by the stereotypes that others have of him, but will affirm from the depth of his soul."⁴ On the other hand, the liminal, existential tone of *The Life of Pablo* echoes theologian Paul Tillich's idea of a self-estrangement: "Man is estranged from what he essentially is."⁵ Paradox is inherent in both of these claims. Kanye's music sonically amplifies this existential tension, highlighting the implications of divinity and humanity, rising and falling, together. We begin by looking at the self-onto-theological assertion that Kanye is "a god." What are the listeners to make of Kanye's religious claims?

Approaching the songs, interviews, and major life events in this manner allows West's music to be the conduit for narrative and theological ideas that are true to his experiences and reality. In addition to the lyrics of his songs and notes from

¹ Daniel White Hodge, "Methods for the Prophetic: Tupac Shakur, Lauryn Hill, and the Case of Ethnolifehistory," *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping New Terrain in the US*, ed. Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard "Bun B" Freeman (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2015), 37.

² Ibid, 24.

³ Ibid, 25.

⁴ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 18.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 127.

interviews, I have included theological ideas from James Cone, Paul Tillich, Kelly Brown Douglas along with the scholarly work of Monica Miller, Anthony Pinn, Daniel White Hodge, and other Hip Hop scholars that provide a multifarious, interdisciplinary approach to this essay. I am indebted to their scholarship. Essentially, my aim is to look at Kanye's life, his musical output, and to take his claims seriously.

Yeezus: A Politico-Socio-Theological Construct

"Is hip hop a euphemism for a new religion?" – Kanye West, "Gorgeous."

In *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, Monica Miller gives careful attention to the emergence of ideas that are moving away from the strictly religious towards a personal construct of meaning. She advocates for a "redescription of the religious study of Hip Hop from assumptions of religious *presence* to religion as social formation and process."⁶ She continues, "Instead of asking what 'is' religious about Hip Hop culture – I ask, what do *uses* of religion accomplish for competing social and cultural interests?"⁷ In the world of religious studies, it is imperative, as Miller makes clear, to see religion as a social construct, like race or gender: "there's nothing *essentially* 'real' about race or gender beyond an inculcated performativity of cultural, social, and political norms and values."⁸ Since religion is dependent upon social and cultural norms, personal experience is fundamental to constructing new theological claims that inform the social. Accordingly, we can ask, what does it mean for Kanye to assert and acclaim his own god-ness? How does he use religion to do so? Further, we can ask how the theological claims he makes deconstruct and reorient listeners towards a subterranean social reality? What is Kanye constructing?

This section looks at how the emergence of Kanye's album, *Yeezus* (2013), forever changed the Hip Hop landscape. My arguments are organized into three sequential songs from *Yeezus*: "Black Skinheads," "I Am A God" and "New Slaves." First, I unpack "Black Skinheads" in light of the Five Percent Nation, and explore the ways it unsettles racial stereotypes and norms, ending by signifying self-proclaimed divinity – a supreme status, "God!" Then, I explore "I Am A God," focusing on the issue of embodiment in relation to blackness. Finally, I look at "New Slaves" vis-à-vis the ideas of racism and classism.

Black Skinhead (BLKKK SKKKNHEAD)

Listening to the tracks from *Yeezus* sequentially and in the context of the entire record, there is no surprise to hear the song, "Black Skinhead" preceding "I Am a God" and "New Slaves." It is a purposeful progression and juxtaposition of the

⁶ Monica R. Miller, "Don't Judge a Book By Its Cover," *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 66.

⁷ Ibid, 66.

⁸ Ibid, 67.

human and divine realities that Yeezus must manage - no doubt in tension. What does it mean for Yeezus to be a black skinhead, a god, and a slave? This Trinitarian formula seems to be contradictory, yet Kanye asserts them concurrently. The alternative spelling for the song, "BLKKK SKKKNHEAD," is indicative of West's tone and intent: He puts the letters "KKK" in both words, and puts the title in all capital letters. Perhaps the listener should think of the title yelled at them. We will see why that is appropriate.

From the first verse of the song, Kanye is letting listeners know he is indignant and has no qualms about saying why:

*For my theme song (black!)
My leather black jeans on (black!)
My by any means on
Pardon, I'm getting my scream on
Enter the kingdom
But watch who you bring home
They see a black man with a white woman
At the top floor they gone come to kill King Kong
Middle America packed in
Came to see me in my black skin
Number one question they asking
Fuck every question you asking
If I don't get ran out by Catholics
Here come some conservative Baptists
Claiming I'm overreacting
Like them black kids in Chiraq bitch⁹*

The interjections, "black!" alone, inform the listener of the purpose of the song. Thus, it is fitting that West references Malcolm X in the third line: "We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence *by any means necessary*" (emphasis mine).¹⁰ In short, perhaps West is venting his rage with perceptions of his black body as a threat—displayed by his comments about King Kong and Middle America. The words "kill King Kong" also form the alliteration, KKK. This is no coincidence; Kanye is playing with race, particularly racism that culminates in the devaluation of black bodies: "Claiming I'm overreacting/Like them black kids in Chiraq bitch." That Kanye focuses on the body foreshadows what is to come: Yeezus is Kanye's focus on his blackness, and that blackness is divine. In addition, his body is the locus of this divine incarnation. Yeezus suggests black supremacy.

⁹ Kanye West, "Black Skinhead," (Def Jam Records, 2013).

¹⁰ Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder, 1992).

In the chapter “Black Churches, Hip Hop, and the Body” of *Breaking Bread, Breaking Beats*, the authors focus on the issue of embodiment. For their purposes, they reference Anthony Pinn’s definition that there are two definitions of the body: “(1) as a biochemical reality—a physical, material substance that navigates the world and engages with other bodies; and (2) as a social or discursive body—the body as it is ‘created’ and defined using language.”¹¹ Though there are two definitions, it is clear that the former shapes the latter. However, the social system includes the political, which “helps in this process of valuing and devaluing bodies by determining patterns for the presentation and function of our bodies.”¹² It is this system, with all of its expectations and regulations, which Yeezus is contesting in “Black Skinhead.” By focusing on the body, West is performing a double move: commenting on the treatment of black bodies and contesting that treatment with his own black body. This provocative move further intensifies in the end of the song when Kanye begins to assert, “God!”

Yeezy does not soften his tone in Verse 2:

Stop all that coon shit (black!)
Early morning cartoon shit (black!)
This is that goon shit
Fuck up your whole afternoon shit
I'm aware I'm a wolf
Soon as the moon hit
I'm aware I'm a king
Back out the tomb bitch
Black out the room, bitch
Stop all that coon shit
These niggas ain't doin' shit
Them niggas ain't doin' shit
Come on homie what happened
You niggas ain't breathing you gasping
These niggas ain't ready for action
*Ready-ready for action*¹³

What might it mean to “stop all that coon shit?” Historically, the word “coon” represents a de-humanizing caricature (from the word raccoon) played by black male and female actors.¹⁴ As the Museum of Jim Crow Memorabilia explains, the coon has a

¹¹ Anthony Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 5 quoted in Anthony Pinn, *Breaking Bread, Breaking Beats: Churches and Hip-Hop: A Basic Guide to Key Issues* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 40.

¹² Ibid, 40.

¹³ Kanye West, “Black Skinhead,” (Def Jam Records, 2013).

¹⁴ The Coon Caricature - Anti-black Imagery - Jim Crow Museum - Ferris State University. Accessed June 01, 2017, <http://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/News/jimcrow/coon/>.

racist history:

The coon caricature is one of the most insulting of all anti-black caricatures. The name itself, an abbreviation of raccoon, is dehumanizing. As with Sambo, the coon's portrayal was a lazy, easily frightened, chronically idle, inarticulate, buffoon... Racial caricatures undergird stereotypes, and the stereotyping of blacks as coons continued throughout the 20th Century.¹⁵

As a response, West informs the listener that this song is a response to the ways blacks are not valued. Often, black male and female actors play the role of the "coon." Could Kanye also be calling out these actors for going along with the script of racism? Since he is both a "wolf" and a "king," (i.e., not a coon) West uses this song as a call to action. Thought of in light of his alternative spelling in the title, "BLKKK SKKKKNHEAD," the action becomes quite clear. Unlike others that, "ain't doin' shit," Kanye is poised for action. In "Black Skinhead," Kanye takes on all those who are critical of his blackness, boldly exclaiming in the end, "If I knew what I knew in the past, I would have been blacked out on your ass."¹⁶ On the outro of the song, he repeatedly exclaims "God!" as a transition to the next song, "I Am A God."¹⁷ Because the social both constructs theology and constitutes understandings of the body, Yeezus is deconstructing and reconstructing harmful norms of the black body. That God's personification in the black man— how that body displays and reckons with— identifies Yeezus as the locus wherein the political, social, and theological coalesce. Yeezus signifies both the embodiment of blackness and the incarnation of a god.

I Am A (Black) God

At the onset of the song, "I Am A God," Kanye's initial assertion that, "I am a god. So hurry up with my damn massage,"¹⁸ resonates. Such a claim is undoubtedly meant to provoke shock and awe; but on another level, it is an important onto-theological statement: For Kanye, is not mere braggadocio; rather, "I am a god" is a proclamation, an exhortation (to use a theological word) of his being. Despite the realities of racism and the devaluation of his body, West is elevating himself. In addition, with this self-affirmation comes the existential, that is, as theologian Paul Tillich defines, the "attitude of participating with one's own existence in some other existence."¹⁹ Yeezus is a form of self-participation with divine and human consequence. It is participation *with* and participation *in* the divine that undergirds the claim "I am a god"; and it is but a piece of the complex politico-socio-theological puzzle that constitutes Yeezus.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kanye West, "Black Skinhead," (Def Jam Records, 2013).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kanye West, "I Am A God", (Def Jam Records, 2013).

¹⁹ Tillich, 125.

In an interview with Zane Lowe, Kanye talks about recording the track “I Am a God.” His demeanor escalates as he describes the words of those that spew hate upon his claim that he is a god: “Who does he [Kanye] think he is”? He responds, “I just told you who I thought I was, a god!” He then asks Zane if it would be better or more appropriate if he had a song that says, “I am a nigga... or I am a gangsta... or I am a pimp... all those colors and patinas fit better?”²⁰ West pointing out what the “haters” are actually asking concludes the segment: “How could you say you’re a god when you were shipped over to America and your last name is a slave owner’s”? His claim to divinity questions the tarnished history of slavery and the reality he must live with as a black man in the United States. (It is worth noting, however, that Kanye’s everyday reality is far from poverty and the anxiety of survival. Rather, West is speaks of receiving massages and eating croissants.) This attempt to diminish or erase his existence is precisely why he emphatically asserts, “I am a god.” It is a song about superiority, self-worth, and is a response to those who dismiss him because of the color of his skin. *Yeezus* is intentional, fully aware of what he is suggesting; West is reversing stereotypes and challenging norms he deems harmful. As a god, Kanye alone gets to decide.

The unabashed self-affirmation, “I Am a God,” echoes the Hebrew YHWH’s claim that, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14),²¹ perhaps offering another layer of meaning. Coming after “Black Skinheads,” the listener realizes not only the political and social consequences of *Yeezus*, but now also the implications of *Yeezus* as a black god; for *Yeezus*, there is no separation between his blackness and his god-ness, they are one and the same. The thought of a black god – though controversial in a society that engages in continuous whitewashing – is not anomalous. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, scholar and theologian, James H. Cone, writes, “The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of black theology doctrine of God”.²² It is this foundation that West uses to invert “God is black” into “a black god”; and it gives his claim a controversial edge. *Yeezus*, therefore, is not merely a god in speech only; rather, he is a black god to be revered, to be heard, and be reckoned with. In this way, Kanye is deconstructing social norms and stereotypes in a way that controverts them. In a society where white supremacy rules, how else to better unsettle power dynamics than to assert himself as a black god? To make his case, he uses theology.

As I mention above, West’s claim to be a black god is not unprecedented. Neither is his assertion of his blackness new. In fact, his claims are analogous to the Five Percent Nation. Started by Clarence 13X, who left the Nation of Islam after a

²⁰BBCviral. “Kanye West Zane Lowe (full interview).” YouTube. 2013. Accessed September 20, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9mVmHdYZUI>.

²¹ Exodus 3:14, NRSV.

²² Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 69.

disagreement about W. D. Farad Muhammad's "purity" as a black man, the FPN claimed that "the black man was God personified, and that each black man could cultivate and eventually realize his godliness through meditation, study, and spiritual and physical fitness."²³ One of the nine tenets of the FPN was: "That the black man is God and his proper name is ALLAH – Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head."²⁴

Though Kanye claims to be "a god," he still admits the existence of a God. In fact, he interchanges the two terms. We may think of a oneness and manyness of g/Gods. Which g/God should we stop playing with? Consider the lyrics:

*I am a god
Even though I'm a man of God
My whole life in the hands of God
So y'all better quit playing with God.*²⁵

This is further fleshed out in Verse 2:

*I just talked to Jesus
He said, "What up Yeezus?"
I said, "Shit I'm chilling
Trying to stack these millions"
I know he the most high
But I am a close high
Mi casa es su casa
That's our costra nostra
I am a god.*²⁶

Perhaps we should see Yeezus and Jesus as brothers. In this part, Kanye acknowledges Jesus's superiority, while still maintaining his god-status. For those familiar with the New Testament scriptures, this brings to mind the famous passage in Philippians about Jesus's humility and the dynamics of his own god-status:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)

There is implied incarnation in both the New Testament reference and the words of Yeezus. How might we take seriously West's proud claim of divinity in light of Jesus's own humble claims? Though Yeezus is a god, a "close high," he is not the "most high."

²³ Christopher Johnson, "God, the Black Man and the Five Percenters," NPR, August 04, 2006, accessed June 01, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5614846>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Kanye West, "I Am A God", (Def Jam Records, 2013).

²⁶ Ibid.

Like Jesus, there is an element of anthropomorphized divinity in West's claims of being a god. Unlike myths or ancient stories of gods that are distant or invisible, Yeezus is here, in the now, acting inside of history. Consequently, his message is loud, and he is a god among the social order. Insofar as Yeezus is a god, individuals must hear and reckon with his voice. Unapologetically, unreservedly, and creatively, Yeezus, god in participatory incarnation, makes clear he will not be silent; he will not be stopped; he will not be controlled. The complexity of the socio-theological construction of Yeezus further complicates by his concurrent claims in "New Slaves." However, as the Philippians passage makes clear, even Jesus took the "form of a slave," albeit in a different manner.

New Slaves

Following the song, "I Am a God," is the song, "New Slaves." Moreover, the pendulum swings. As Kanye's music seems to stretch and transcend comfortable paradigms of divinity and humanity, "New Slaves" introduces a complicating tension: Yeezus, black god, is also a kind of "new slave." The question presents itself: How can Kanye identify as both a black god and a new slave? What is essentially *new* about slavery? How is it that one that has god-status can also be subject to a status of bondage? This ironic intersection meets Kanye's relentlessly unruly voice, "You see there's leaders and there's followers, but I'd rather be a dick than a swallower."²⁷ In other words, he would rather be the person speaking the truth — no matter how seemingly vulgar or offensive — than have to "swallow" it. Defiance, thus, in addition to bondage, emerges as a central theme in "New Slaves." West seizes control of his own body as if to say, "You cannot say this for me — I have complete power and control over my own body." It is both passive and active power. He continues by confessing he is a new slave and he sees the evidence of this phenomenon, or the "blood on the leaves" (a visceral reference to lynching in the song "Strange Fruit" written by Nina Simone and made popular by Billie Holliday). Though he admits his status as a new slave with the same ferocity that he claims to be a god, he uses the microphone as a way to, literally and metaphorically, give voice to or amplify his insubordination. As the song continues, the message becomes clear: just as Yeezus is a different kind of god, that is, a god rendered vulnerable by his blackness, he is consequently a different kind of slave.

The song begins: "My mama was raised in the era when clean water was only served to the fairer skin."²⁸ A statement in his own modern context subsequently follows the experiences to which his mother was subject: "Doin' clothes, you would have thought I had help, but they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself,"²⁹ speaking to his struggles in the fashion industry with racism. He continues a back-

²⁷ Kanye West, "New Slaves," (Def Jam Records, 2013).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

and-forth, then-and-now comparison by saying that there is, in relation to black people, poor racism, which tells the shopper, “don’t touch anything in the store;” and then there is rich racism, which tells the shopper: “come in, please buy more”.³⁰ In both cases, Kanye is saying that racism exists no matter what the economic status of the individual may be. Kanye touches on the relationship between race and class — no matter the class, however wealthy or poor, racism still exists within these different levels of socioeconomic divisions. In short, racism trumps class. However, some might wonder whether race does in fact, trump class. I wonder how marrying into a white family has affected Kanye’s own understanding of class? Is Kanye conflicted by the stark contrast between the way he grew up and the lavish lifestyle he now enjoys?

Here is the emergence of an important dynamic: Because Yeezus is a black god, he acknowledges the real human challenges and limitations that he faces because of his blackness. The slave-language and imagery provides a powerful, poignant illustration, but Kanye’s type of slave is *new* in the sense that it is much more personal for him than racial issues of skin color. In the same interview with DJ Zane Lowe, Kanye makes the claim that everyone is a slave, saying, “I am a slave to my passions.”³¹ He is thus bound by the chains of his own desires, mainly, fashion, art, creativity, materialism. This revelation brings with it an interesting dichotomy, one that almost implies Kanye’s existence, as a new slave, may, in some sense, be self-subscribed — a twist in contrast to his godness. Thus, there exists, here, an anxiety, and, to use Tillich’s phrase, perhaps an “anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness.”

What if one thinks of “New Slaves” in light of white supremacy? In the Trump era to “Make America Great Again,” American exceptionalism has resurged to the fore—that the answer to present problems is in the past ideals of the nation. However, as Kelly Brown Douglas argues in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, American exceptionalism is a metaphor for Anglo-Saxon Chauvinism (i.e., white supremacy).³² Therefore, to pursue a return to historical values in the US is to invoke a society where black people are treated as chattel—American exceptionalism is a euphemism for racism. Whereas other immigrants have been able to assimilate into whiteness—a metaphor for hegemonic power—black people have not been able to escape the grips of different forms of (new) slavery because of the color of their skin. *Yeezus*, thought of in this light, is ironic. Thus, I ask, is income inequality not a form of new slavery? Is mass incarceration—where black bodies compose the mass of the imprisoned and work for pennies—not a form of new slavery? This is the reality behind Kanye’s lyrics,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ BBCviral. “Kanye West Zane Lowe (full interview).” YouTube. 2013. Accessed September 20, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9mVmHdYZUI>.

³² Kelly Brown Douglass, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 11.

*Meanwhile the DEA
teamed up with the CCA
They tryna lock niggas up
They tryna make new slaves
See that's that privately owned prisons
Get your piece today.*³³

In this sense, Kanye's words about new slaves have contemporary implications. Whereas "Black Skinhead" and "I Am A God" convey an aggressive and relentless West, "New Slaves" gives the listener a sobering paradox to deal with: Yeezus may be a black skinhead and a black god, but he cannot escape this form of new slavery. Yet, to some extent, Kanye has managed to stand outside the system – given his cultural power, wealth, and intelligence – to see the rise of a new kind of slavery that exploits black people. The ties between cotton-pickers and rap artists – the continued exploitation of black labor – is palpable in his lyric. The question remains: Is he claiming the identity of new slave for himself or flagging it as an injustice that may not fully impinge on him?

Mixed Signals?

Yeezus, the black god of rap, may confine to a new form of slavery through his own passions; however, the terms of his slave-status arguably dictate by his own terms as a god (a self-hierarchy or division?). This control is manifest in the delivery of his message. When Kanye West decided to release his song, "New Slaves," he did so via holographic projection on the walls of buildings in 66 cities around the world. Yeezus is therefore creatively stating his existence as a god through omnipresence and theophany, revealing his message through his music (as a way of transcending the limitations of being human). *Rolling Stone* captured the moment:

Kanye West gave the world its first official taste of his new album on Friday night by projecting the new song "New Slaves" along with visuals on buildings across the globe. The video was projected at various times throughout the night on 66 buildings in cities including New York, Toronto, Chicago, London, Paris and Berlin. In West's hometown of Chicago, it was projected on a wall of Wrigley Field; in Toronto, on the Royal Ontario Museum; and in New York, Kanye's face appeared on the wall of a 5th Avenue Prada store, among other locations.³⁴

Few would be surprised that the message and basis of *Yeezus* meets with strong opposition from various groups of people. After a *Rolling Stone* picture where Kanye poses wearing a crown of thorns in an obvious likeness to Jesus, critics emerged from all corners of society to raise their voices to condemn – or at least interrogate – his motives, life decisions, rhetoric, and so on. The controversy spilled

³³ Kanye West, "New Slaves." (Def Jam Records, 2013).

³⁴ Miriam Coleman, "Kanye West Premieres 'New Slaves' With Video Projections around the World," *Rolling Stone*, accessed October 17, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/kanye-west-premieres-new-slaves-with-video-projections-around-the-world-171436/>.

over into his personal life, affecting his business decisions and musical output. Notice it was not his claims to be a new type of slave that irked these critics; rather, his identification with the divine caused the outrage. Said differently, a white supremacist society has no problems with equating blacks to slaves, but to exalt black people to a divine status is blasphemous. It is difficult to think of black equality, let alone, black superiority. All the critics, the pushback, the controversy, and the noise constitute the backdrop for Kanye's newest record, *The Life of Pablo*.

The Life of Pablo (Which One?):

Somewhere Between Escobar, Picasso, and the Apostle

*"I miss the old Kanye, straight from the 'Go Kanye
Chop up the soul Kanye, set on his goals Kanye
I hate the new Kanye, the bad mood Kanye
The always rude Kanye, spaz in the news Kanye
I miss the sweet Kanye, chop up the beats Kanye
I gotta to say, at that time I'd like to meet Kanye
See I invented Kanye, it wasn't any Kanyes
And now I look and look around and there's so many Kanyes
I used to love Kanye, I used to love Kanye
I even had the pink polo, I thought I was Kanye
What if Kanye made a song, about Kanye?
Called "I Miss The Old Kanye," man that'd be so Kanye
That's all it was Kanye, we still love Kanye
And I love you like Kanye loves Kanye."* –

Kanye West, "I Love Kanye"

Yeezus was released in 2013. In September 2014, Kanye West married Kim Kardashian. Did West, in some ways, assimilate into whiteness? Perhaps it is the only evidence one could find that might explain the digression in tone and message from *Yeezus* to *The Life of Pablo*. The release of West's newest album, *The Life of Pablo*, occurs amid several delays, problems with dates, and various puzzling public events (like a Jay-Z-sponsored Tidal-exclusive release). Not to mention, after Kanye's attestation that the record is a gospel record, directly following the first spiritual-type track, "Ultralight Beam," West begins with talk of strippers and, perhaps most astonishingly, claims that he: 1) might still have sex with Taylor Swift and 2) he "made that bitch famous." These puzzlements have only enhanced speculation and suspicions surrounding his personal and professional life. Some critics have suggested that, as Hip Hop artist shifting to a reality show celebrity and fashion designer, Kanye took on more than he bargained for and perhaps lost some of his clarity, fragmenting his identity in the process. Amid failures and harsh feedback of his fashion line, Twitter rants revealed a different, more vulnerable and frustrated side of West. Just as the *Life of Pablo* was to release, Kanye discloses a personal financial crisis via Twitter:

he is \$53 million in debt. Not all of these anxieties, failures, betrayals, and feelings are wasted, however; they invest and instill in his newest project. This section looks at Kanye's existential tone found in a few of the songs from *The Life of Pablo*, focusing on how the new album complicates—and walks back — some of the bold, politico-socio-theological claims of *Yeezus*. "Ultralight Beam," "FML," "Real Friends," and "Saint Pablo." I bring Paul Tillich into this analysis, particularly his thoughts about "the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness," which connect my arguments to a philosophical tradition. I begin by looking at "Ultralight Beam," as it presents the tension of the record, followed by the bleak picture painted in "FML" and "Real Friends," and finally "Saint Pablo," as it opens the door for a future to be Yeezus again.

Ultralight Beam

With the first track of *The Life of Pablo*, it appears that West delivers on his promises to make a gospel record. The song begins with child fervently praying with a woman echoing in agreement. At first, it feels very spiritual indeed. Next, West's voice emerges with a statement: "I'm tryna keep my faith."³⁵ That Kanye is trying to keep the faith speaks to the theological realities of *Yeezus* and his personal anxieties that have followed. He continues his prayer:

Deliver us serenity
Deliver us peace
Deliver us loving
*We know we need it.*³⁶

The reverently uplifting nature of the song reverberates in the hook:

I'm tryna keep my faith
But I'm looking for more
Somewhere I can feel safe
And end my holy war
*I'm tryna keep my faith.*³⁷

This war is a war fought within. In a sense, West is not at war *with* his faith, but rather, *for* it. The massive sound of the gospel choir reifies the tone of the song — this prayerful intro. The song ends with a prayer from gospel artist, Kirk Franklin. The prayer is not only important to the song, but it serves as foundational for the entire record:

Father, this prayer is for everyone that feels they're not good enough.
This prayer's for everybody that feels like they're too messed up.

³⁵ Kanye West, "Ultralight Beam" (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

*For everyone that feels they've said "I'm sorry" too many times.
You can never go too far when you can't come back home again.
That's why I need...
Faith, more, safe, war.*³⁸

The beginning of *The Life of Pablo* feels like a church altar, the liminal place where one does business with God. Rather than a return to god-status, however, this song marks the beginning of a further unraveling. It suggests that, if—or before—Kanye can ascend again to divine status, he must reach rock bottom. Therefore, it is not coincidental that liberation theology occurs from the bottom-up.

FML

FML, which most commonly is an acronym for “Fuck My Life” — though it could stand for “For My Lady” or any other combination of words and phrases — reveals a sight and sound of Kanye, not evident in *Yeezus*. Clearly, the song somberly speaks to Kanye’s regret and struggle: “I been thinking about my vision. Pour out my feelings. Revealing the layers to my soul, my soul.”³⁹ Call it honesty or existential angst or soul-searching, Kanye displays a vulnerability here that is unprecedented in his work — certainly following the bold claims of *Yeezus*. The hook, or chorus of the song, is the Weeknd’s chilling voice, singing: “They wish I would go ahead and fuck my life up. Can’t let them get to me. And even though I always fuck my life up. Only I can mention me.”⁴⁰ Along with the confession to fucking his life up, Kanye reserves the sole right of mentioning — or confessing — it.

Perhaps displaying what Tillich calls “the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness,” “FML” reflects indicatively, Kanye’s personal anxiety exacerbates by nonbeing—or not-being-Yeezus. Tillich writes, “Nonbeing threatens man as a whole, and therefore threatens his spiritual as well as his ontic self-affirmation.”⁴¹ Kanye’s interwoven identities are distinguishable but inseparable; his spiritual and ontic self-affirmations are one, and the same. To balance a multiplicity of meanings, Kanye has the task of affirming himself in meaning that locates, ironically, in himself. Once the circle is broken, the fallout is detrimental to his identity in every aspect. There is death and loss in this place, as well as grief and anxiety. Tillich continues: “The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of existence.”⁴² Moving from Yeezus, black god, to an indeterminate Pablo is proof of loss of a spiritual center; he has lost both a faith in and faith *with-in* himself.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kanye West, “FML” (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Tillich, 46.

⁴² Ibid, 47.

Real Friends

"Real Friends" offers more insight into Kanye's most intimate relationships, particularly within his family. He begins the song by asking, "Real friends — how many of us?" followed by asking "how many jealous?" and "how many honest?"⁴³ His spiraling out of control includes a disconnection between family and even church spaces: "I'm a deadbeat cousin — I hate family reunions. Fuck the church up by drinkin' at the communion. Spilling free wine, now my tux is ruined."⁴⁴ This statement, while cleverly worded, implies that he is at odds with two things that he has spoken extensively about in his music, family and religion. His busyness, along with his disinterest in family reunions, makes him a "deadbeat" cousin. In the same way, his concern only for his tux and wasting free wine underscores self-absorption. The spiritual center within himself and within the church seems to be lost for West, in an abyss of anxiety and self-doubt.

His family ties experience further strain when he speaks to rumors in 2015, confirming he had a cousin steal a laptop that had a sex tape of West with other women. Kanye got the laptop back after paying the cousin a fee of \$250,000. The song continues to paint a portrait of isolation and betrayal: "Real friends. I guess I get what I deserve don't I? I guess I get what I deserve don't I? Talk down on my name, throw dirt on him."⁴⁵ Importantly, what does it say of West that he is estranged from his own family, while being primarily associated with the white Kardashians? How might one see this in light of Yeezy, the black god? In what ways are his former unabashed blackness and family ties squelched by his new family dynamic? The middle-to-end of *The Life of Pablo* is somber and dark, making one wonder: will Kanye ever be Yeezus again?

Existential Theology and the Apostle Paul

In what ways can one view Kanye's journey from Yeezus to Pablo as an existential crisis? Overall, worded differently, in what ways is it *not*? In a Tillichian sense, if one's being includes a relation to meaning, then a "threat to his spiritual being is a threat to his whole being."⁴⁶ Here is the place where Yeezus and Pablo coalesce: in the threat of nonbeing, asking questions to rediscover matters of ultimate concern. Might the answer, for Kanye, (i.e., the hopes of finding his godlikeness again) be found through what Tillich calls "power of being;" mainly, a power of potential, a defiance of his blackness, and further exploration and discovery into authentic being? For Tillich, this power of being transcends "the nonbeing which is experienced in the

⁴³ Kanye West, "Real Friends" (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tillich, 51.

anxiety of fate and death, which is present in the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, which is effective in the anxiety of guilt and condemnation.”⁴⁷ Such is the place in which Kanye now stands: between the god that was and the man that could be. The acquiescence from Yeezus to Pablo, brings to mind the words of another Pablo in his letter to the Romans:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?... So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin (Romans 7:21-25, NRSV).

When the Apostle Paul (or, Pablo) talks about delighting in the law of God that is in his innermost self, he is speaking about an incarnation and bearing witness to that inhabited presence. Yet, like Kanye, he also speaks of his wretchedness, his flesh being a slave to sin. There is a battle between Paul’s innermost self and his flesh, a tug-of-war between who he is and who he wants to be. Could this be the inner turmoil that Kanye evokes in the persona of Pablo? How might we listen to “Saint Pablo” in relation to “New Slaves?”

In his letter to the church at Rome, the Apostle Paul speaks at great length of a battle of two natures: the spirit and the flesh. Is Kanye, through his progression from Yeezus to Pablo, suggesting a similar struggle, between rap god and wretched man? The struggle brings to mind again Tillich’s definition of existential as an “attitude of participating with one’s own existence in some other existence.”

Saint Pablo

Up from the dark places of anxiety, from the liminal spaces of emptiness and meaninglessness, Kanye ends *The Life of Pablo* with a late-added track, “Saint Pablo.” At first glance, Saint Pablo is likely a reference to the life of the Apostle Paul, adding another layer to the Picasso/Escobar/unknown possible identities. Upon further investigation, however, the significance and importance of the song as the closing track must be not understated. Knowing the progression — or rather digression — from Yeezus to Pablo and the coming to terms with the reality of an anxiety, that has so affected him, the listener hears hope for Kanye. The chorus of the song sings, “Yeah, you’re looking at church in the night sky, wondering whether God’s gonna say hi. Oh, you’re looking at church in the night sky, and you wonder where is God in your nightlife.” The chorus ends with, “The night sky, yeah, I feel like I’m home, yeah.”⁴⁸ He equates church with home (which echoes Kirk Franklin’s prayer in the opening track, “Ultralight Beam,” “you can never go too far when you can’t come

⁴⁷ Ibid, 155

⁴⁸ Kanye West, “Saint Pablo,” (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

back home again.”⁴⁹) That Kanye suggests a type of homecoming — to church or God — should not surprise the listener. Hearing the humble and almost desperate lyrics throughout the record, “Saint Pablo” brings to an end one project and era, in hopes of a more self-actualized future project. Kanye’s god status may very well be outdated; however, finding his center again, his meaning, his center or ground of being, is where the song positions him.

Tillich’s aforementioned idea of courage as self-affirmation in spite the fact of nonbeing makes a connection with Kanye’s final track — via religious roots. Could “Saint Pablo” be indicative of a homecoming or religious return for Kanye? Just as Tillich posits that, “Every courage to be has an open or hidden religious root,”⁵⁰ perhaps for Kanye, it is a both/and: an open *and* hidden root, one within and one outward. The complicated relationship of religious roots, open and hidden, presents three questions to consider further: 1) By returning to the sanctuary, or the house of God, will Kanye once again find an inner presence of the divine (Yeezus)? 2) How might his outward religious roots inform and transform his own history of divine embodiment and empowerment? 3) To what extent do the lyrics of the song set up a future event of liberation? James Cone echoes this sentiment through the lens of black theology: “The doctrine of God in black theology must be of the God who is participating in the liberation of the oppressed of the land...The God in black theology is the God of and for the oppressed, the God who comes into view in their liberation.”⁵¹ Whether or not Saint Pablo can return to the black godness of Yeezus remains to be seen, but if the ending track is any indication, there may be yet a “courage to be” Yeezus again.

Conclusion

Though Kanye has suggested divine likeness before on another project (e.g., his rap accolades in “New God Flow”), I limited the scope of this project to *Yeezus* and *The Life of Pablo*. Thus, appropriately, I chose a few songs from each record in a sequential manner to suggest a progression. Further, I posited that the uncertainty of *which* Pablo Kanye is identifying with exacerbates the existential liminality of his persona. Kanye’s claims to be Yeezus, found throughout his record, *Yeezus*, dissipate in *The Life of Pablo*. He uses the name Ye or Yeezy, but not Yeezus as an equivalent to god-status. Instead, Kanye’s tone and lyrics in the songs discussed from *The Life of Pablo* are more vulnerable, more introspective, and more human. Using ethnohistory and various scholars with theological and philosophical backgrounds, my intent was to explore the background that produced Kanye’s last two works. It is impossible to know what the loss of his mother and role his marriage and immersion into the Kardashian family may have played in these changes. Furthermore, as the song, “Saint Pablo” leaves open, it is

⁴⁹ Kanye West, “Ultralight Beam,” (Good Music; Def Jam Records; Roc-A-Fella, 2016).

⁵⁰ Tillich, 156.

⁵¹ Cone, 64.

unclear if there is a return to Yeezus' black godness in Kanye's future. (These findings are more complex by his bizarre political alliance with President Donald J. Trump and his recent hospitalization for mental fatigue.) Much remains unknown; however, the findings of the project leave room for further inquiry and ongoing discussion.

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Book Review

In Search of Soul: Hip-Hop, Literature, and Religion By Nava, Alejandro. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017. Pp. xiv + 275. \$29.95.

There are books written for general audiences and those written for academia. *In Search of Soul: Hip Hop, Literature and Religion* clearly aims at pleasing both. It is not an easy task to strike a balance between an imaginative, creative style of writing and the vigorous intellectual depth required of stimulating scholarship. The author skillfully achieves this in an interdisciplinary monograph, which combines theological, philosophical, historical, sociological, aesthetic and stylistic approaches. Alejandro Nava is a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Arizona, where he teaches a course titled “Rap, Culture, and God.” His book is the result of many years spent studying the subject. Indeed Professor Michael Eric Dyson first introduced him to the study of Hip Hop and religion in 1995 at Chicago Theological Seminary. Both are committed to proving that, contrary to popular belief, hip-hop can have profound resonances with religious beliefs and thereby possess a form of wisdom and compassion.

Nava’s book divides into two parts and examines two major streams that have shaped Western ideas of soul. The first considers the “sacred” histories of the soul and explores the religious and theological perspectives of the human soul. In the second part, he looks at profane accents of soul and investigates the cultural, musical and literary interpretations of “soul.” He argues in favour of the porousness of these two dimensions of soul, to him that they are distinct but not separate concepts “with dimensions of each leaking into the other” (3-4).

Nava starts by retracing a history of the increasing loss of the concepts of God and soul all the way to the Modern Age. Yet modern movements such as romanticism, modernism, African American and Latin American thought “resuscitated and breathed new life into the concept of soul, making it stronger and richer, infusing it with the magic elixirs of poetry, myth, melody, and cultural style” (15-16). He argues that separations such as *soul-body*, *supernatural-natural*, *sacred-profane* “are products of contingent historical genealogies in modern Western Europe” (20): they should not predetermine our understanding of the meaning of “soul” in Judaism, Christianity or Afro-Latin American traditions. These traditions, Nava insists, are characterised by “the intermingling of the sacred and profane” (21). In the biblical sense, for instance, the soul

defines as “an icon of both divine presence and transcendence” sprawling from “the fundamental assumption that the human soul is made in the image of God” (23). He also draws a map of human nature, considering the intermingling roles of the “heart” and the “soul” in biblical narratives. This leads him to a “crucial biblical insight”: “that knowledge of the heart is accessible to all, educated or illiterate, lowly or highborn” (57).

Nava then explores Erich Auerbach’s characterisation of the Bible’s tongue as “laconic and rough” (59). Its purpose, he argues is “fidelity in recording God’s presence in and through the melees and struggles of time, situating their characters in their natural and social-political contexts” by turning “the themes of exodus and migration, slavery, and famine into parables of the human condition and thus depict[ing] the whole scope of human affairs from the perspective of a conquered and hungry people” (71). The author compares this to the musical treatment of human suffering: “rather than explaining or solving human suffering, biblical poetry rhapsodizes,” it is similar to singers of blues music, “more lyrical than logical, more oracular than speculative, more pragmatic than theoretical” (76). After having “excavated” the ancient roots of this concept, Part II shifts its attention to consider “how ‘soul’ picks up modern nuances and becomes synonymous with the elegance of cultural and artistic achievements, especially in music” (5).

Nava starts by considering the place of religion, music, folklore, and the vernacular in two authors’ portraits of soul: Federico García Lorca and Ralph Ellison. For Lorca, soul was a form of creative grace called *Duende*. Nava defines this as “a storm of emotions that blows and swirls in different directions, cross-pollinating a variety of ideas and experiences, including the spiritual and elemental, the sacred and profane” (116). By comparing Lorca’s work with Ellison’s, he underlines the synergies between Spanish soul and black American traditions. Here Nava “falls in the thick of musical and cultural currents of soul” (143) by bringing in preachers, blues singers and rappers to identify similarities in all of these discourses. By doing so, he demonstrates that the relationship between all of these expressions of soul is not one of influence, but rather it is in the conditions that triggered such expressions. To him they are so strongly rooted in the culture that they constantly reoccur through time.

Chapters 6 and 7 are the ones in which Nava focuses his full attention on rap music, in order to explore the transition from the generation of R&B, soul music, and funk to the Hip Hop one. Here he examines the increasing use of an “apocalyptic mode of utterance – shouts, hollers, screams – as a way of registering the feelings of existential brokenness and urban decay in many of these communities” (9). This tone reflected the deteriorating conditions in the ghettos ruled by violence, suffering, poverty, segregation and injustice throughout the 80s and 90s. However, this situation did not shy rappers away from invoking spiritual and religious themes: “as Hip Hop grappled with the diseases of urban life, it often turned to various religions and spiritualities for

therapeutic relief” (193). It acted as a form of hope against nihilistic and self-destructive thoughts.

Overall, Nava’s monograph is an extremely thorough and thought provoking one. He sets out with an ambitious goal to explore a large variety of phenomena, and goes about it in a convincing manner. Not to mention that the elegance of his writing, abundant with hendiadys, similes and metaphors further highlight his vast knowledge across multiple disciplines. *In Search of Soul* is not only a pleasant and enlightening read; it is undoubtedly a goldmine for anyone interested in Hip Hop Studies.

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Contributors

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Cassandra D. Chaney, Ph.D. is a Professor in Child and Family Studies at Louisiana State University (LSU). Dr. Chaney is broadly interested in the dynamics of African-American family life, yet under this umbrella are several primary areas. For one, Dr. Chaney examines the narratives of African-Americans in dating, cohabiting, and married relationships, with a particular interest in relationship formation, maintenance, and stability. Furthermore, Dr. Chaney explores the ways that religiosity and spirituality support African-Americans. In addition, Dr. Chaney examines the representation of African-American couples and families (e.g., structural and functional dynamics) in popular forms of mass media (i.e., television shows, movies, music videos, and song lyrics). Given the increasing number of African Americans that murdered by members of law enforcement, her work critically examines how racism demonstrates and solidifies via individuals and institutions in America. Given the unique socio-historical challenges of Black families, her research provides recommendations regarding how policy can better meet the needs of Black families who experience heightened rates of incarceration, unemployment, weakened family structures, and racism. Most important, her scholarship roots in a strengths-based perspective and emphasizes the various ways that Black families remain resilient in the face of these challenges. In addition to publishing over 80 manuscripts in various journals in the United States and abroad, she has also presented her research during many local, state, and national conferences. She has received invitations to contribute chapters for over 10 book volumes relating to the topics of African American community sentiment regarding marriage, marriage promotion, strong Black marriages, and the racial experiences of Black professors at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). She is an Associate Editor with the *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* (JHHS), and is on the editorial boards of *Family Relations*, *International Journal of Crisis Journalism*, the Editorial Manager of *PLOS One*, and is Review Board Member of *Social Work Online*. She published the co-edited the book *Black Women in Leadership: Their Historical and Contemporary Contributions* with Dr. Dannielle Joy Davis (Peter Lang Publishers) which explores the leadership experiences of Black women within macro

level (such as education, industry, and social services) and micro level (such as family and individual churches) contexts. This interdisciplinary work examines leadership practices, highlighting the historical and current triumphs and barriers of Black women in these roles. Currently, Dr. Chaney is writing two co-authored books related to the characteristics of strong Black marriages and community perceptions of law enforcement.

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Travis Harris is a Doctoral Candidate in William and Mary's American Studies program. His research primarily focuses on African and Africans throughout the Diasporas. His dissertation examines the dispossession of a predominantly Black community from Magruder during World War II and the creation of Camp Peary. In addition to thinking about how Africans have been taken from their homes, Travis also studies African diasporic cultures and aesthetics. He has written two Master's Thesis that have analyzed Hip Hop and religion and published the first academic article on Lecrae. Co-editing this special issue falls directly in line with this scholarly trajectory.

While academics play an important part in Travis' life, his scholarly work connects with what is most important to him, his family and getting Blacks free. Travis is actively involved in the freedom struggle. He also worked with The Lemon Project, which focuses on William and Mary's role in perpetuating slavery and racial discrimination. Travis has served as the Vice President of I.M.P.A.C.T., a faith-based organization in Charlottesville that has fought for justice for the disenfranchised in Charlottesville. He

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